

A Spinster
for the
Unbending
Duke

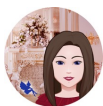
HAZEL LINWOOD

A Spinster for the Unbending Duke

A Historical Regency Romance Novel

Hazel Linwood

Edited by
Eris Hykas



Contents

A Lovely Gift From Me to You
Before You Start Reading...
Love to Read?

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Epilogue
Extended Epilogue

Preview: To Love the Scars of a Duchess
 Prologue
 Chapter 1
 Chapter 2

Also by Hazel Linwood

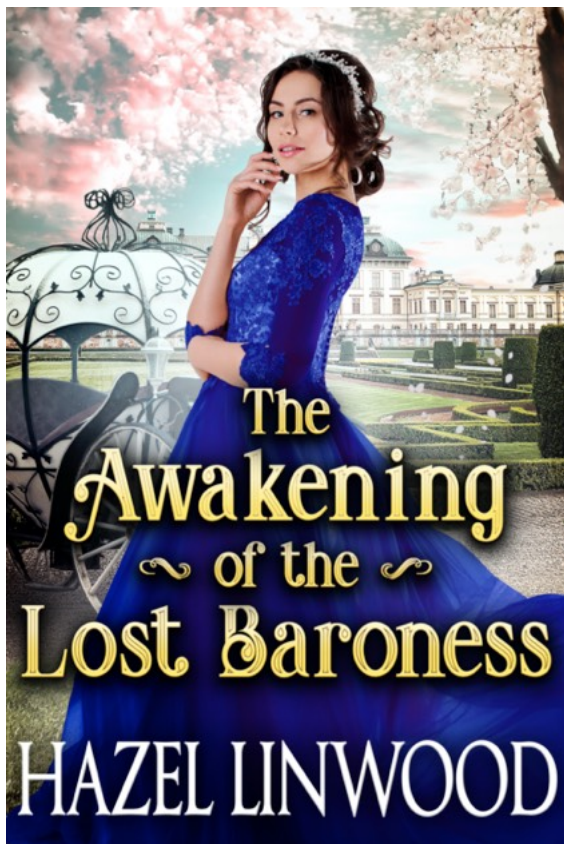
Loved the Book?

About the Author

A Lovely Gift From Me to You

I am so grateful that you have joined me on this journey of mine. Having you beside me is a dream come true for me!

In a way for me to thank you for your support, I am offering you a **free book**. *The Awakening of the Lost Baroness* is only available to people who have downloaded one of my books and you can get your **free** copy by clicking the image below or [this link here!](#)



Thank you for being by my side!
Hazel Linwood



Before You Start Reading...

Did you know that there's a special place where you can chat with me ***and*** with thousands of like-minded bookworms all over the globe?!

Join **Cobalt Fairy's facebook group of voracious readers** and I guarantee you, you'd wish you had joined us sooner!

Let's connect, right NOW!



Just click on the image above! ↑

Love to Read?

If you love to read, and want to be first to know about the newest Clean Regency books by your favorite authors, make sure to check out the link below!

Join **Cobalt Fairy's Newsletter** and enjoy our newest books in the genre you all love!



Just click on the image above! ↑

“I would rather have today with you than forever with anyone else...”

Being a lifelong spinster is a fate Frances has accepted for herself. Not the least bit elegant and very outspoken, men seem to avoid her like the plague. So, not having to worry about a husband, she pours everything she has into building a happy life for her younger sister.

Andrew Jones, the Duke of Reeves, is notorious for his rakish ways, and completely unapologetic about them. Having vowed to never marry, he relies on his younger brother to produce an heir for their bloodline. He is certain no woman can change his mind. Until he meets Frances...

When forced to spend time together to prepare for their siblings' wedding, their personalities instantly clashed. But what started out as disdain, soon turns into something else entirely...Could it be that the Duke of Reeves has finally met his match?

“**T**hey are coming! They are coming! Mercy, they are coming!” a blood-curdling screech splintered through the hallways of Fernside Manor, setting everyone on edge.

Inside her bedchamber, Frances Baxter trembled. “No, no, this cannot be. Not yet. Please, not yet. Take pity, I beg of you, take pity,” she hissed at her reflection, as she frantically tried to flatten a frizzy clump of wiry auburn hair.

A whirlwind of peony-pink muslin exploded into the bedchamber, the blood drained from the young woman’s face; her mouth opening and closing breathlessly, her head twisting back over her shoulder, as though devils were in hot pursuit, and this was her only safe haven. “Frances, they are here! My goodness, help me!”

“There is nothing I can—” Frances’ words were cut short as her younger sister collided with her, almost knocking her to the floor. Had it not been for the high back of her desk chair, keeping her upright with a sharp jab to the hip, she would surely have been sent flying.

“Help me, Sister!” Beautiful brown eyes, the color of sweet treacle, peered desperately up at Frances. “I am not ready for this! Steal me away. Fashion me a rope I might use to flee from this very window. Hide me in the armoire until morning, please!”

Frances chuckled and put her arms around her younger sister, Emmeline, holding her close. “I might need to gather more blankets and coverlets first, or we will surely find ourselves dangling halfway down the side of the Manor and will either have to climb back up or jump. The former will see us back where we started. The latter might

see us with a broken ankle or worse.”

“Then let us forage for additional fabrics!” Emmeline yelled, grimacing at the thought of injury.

The lady’s maid, Cariad, who had been tending to Frances and her disobedient hair, rolled her eyes in amusement. “I’m pretending not to hear any of this, M’ladies.”

“Cariad, you must come too!” Emmeline grabbed for the maid’s hand. “We shall all begin a new life elsewhere. I hear Austria is delightful at this time of year, or Morocco if we desire somewhere further away. If I had freckles from such a fierce sun, I might not be recognized!”

Frances smiled stiffly, aware of the dense constellations of freckles that marked her own face, though she had never spent more than a fleeting moment in the summer sunshine without a parasol. “Did you see the carriages arriving?”

“Why else would I be screeching for your aid, Sister.” Emmeline tugged both the maid and Frances to the window, which looked out over the sprawling grounds of Fernside Manor.

Situated on the edge of the Chiltern Hills, midway between Oxford and London, greenery bloomed in abundance. Nestled in a sweeping valley, sheltered by the rolling hills, they were visually spoiled by the verdant forests and emerald pastures that surrounded their stately Manor. And when they tired of such views, the countryside stretch of the Thames was not far, providing a cooler spot to visit in the warmest peak of the summer.

Frances furrowed her brow. “I see no carriages.”

“They were there. I know they were there. I heard them coming,” Emmeline insisted, hopping from foot to foot in nervous anticipation.

Gently, Frances rested her hands on her sister’s shoulders to try and still her. “You only *heard* them?”

“I... well... no, I know I... hm... I suppose I did not actually *see* any carriages, but—” Emmeline tilted her head to one side. “Where did they go?”

Frances gestured down at a lone horse, pawing at the gravel driveway; its rein held by a yawning stable hand. "I think you heard the express messenger, Dear Sister." She offered a kindly laugh. "It is an easy mistake to make, especially considering you are already beyond giddiness."

"I am not giddy, Sister!" Emmeline protested. "I am terrified!"

Cariad clicked her tongue in restrained disapproval. "Why should you be, M'lady? If the gentleman was an aged ogre with a terrible reputation, I could understand you quaking a bit."

"But Lord Croxley is well regarded among the *ton*," Frances interjected, wanting to calm her sister's nerves. "You should have heard the ladies whispering at Lord Palmer's ball last month—they were, all of them, puce with envy that you were betrothed to Lord Croxley, and they were not."

Emmeline covered her mouth with her hand, hiding a chuckle. "I believe the saying is, "Green with envy," Sweet Sister."

"Indeed, but *they* were puce, almost to the point of turning purple." Frances gave her sister a playful nudge. "The gentlemen were equally prone to gossiping, and I daresay many a heart has been broken, and many an unrequited love will never be declared, after they learned of your imminent marriage."

Emmeline gasped. "Cease, Sister! That cannot be true. Who would be envious of me? I will not, and cannot, believe it, though I thank you for your kind words. I know you are only trying to put me at ease."

From someone else, Emmeline's protestation might have sounded insincere, and might have been followed by some pleased preening, but Emmeline meant what she said. To this day, Frances could not fathom how her younger sister could not see her own rare, astonishing beauty, or understand what a "darling" of Society she was, thanks to her sweetness, intellect, and generosity of spirit.

"Forgive my bluntness, but I've always thought your sister needed spectacles, M'lady," Cariad remarked to Frances, visibly dumbfounded.

Frances nodded. "I entirely agree."

"I could have sworn I saw carriages!" Emmeline sighed, missing the point of Frances and Cariad's comments. "Goodness, I wonder if I do need spectacles. Or is it my hearing that is the trouble? I promise, I heard more than one set of horse's hooves... or I thought I did. The evidence is hard to deny."

Frances turned Emmeline around and twisted two loose strands of shiny, bronze-colored hair that framed her sister's face, around her fingers to keep the curl. "Do you admit that you panicked for no reason?"

"Never," Emmeline replied, fanning herself. "The carriages *will* be coming soon. Perhaps, it was a premonition."

Frances smiled. "You will adore Lord Croxley and live a blissfully happy life, ensuring you continue to be the envy of everyone in England." She carefully cupped her sister's face. "Indeed, *I* should be the one fretting and asking for leave to escape, for you know I do not fare well at gatherings. If this party were not being held in our own Manor, I might be mistaken for a troll and cast out."

Emmeline looked horrified. "Do not say such things! You are a divine creature, Franny. The most exquisite being I have ever encountered. If I were more jealously inclined, I would hide you away, in case Lord Croxley fell in love with you instead!" She flashed a smile. "Fortunately, I care more for you and your opinion than that of some fellow I met once when I was a child. If he were to love you, I would gift him to you without hesitation!"

The sentiment was bittersweet to Frances. She knew Emmeline believed that such a thing was possible, that she was beautiful enough to whisk a gentleman's attentions away, but Frances was under no illusions when it came to her appeal. Or lack thereof.

Too tall by the *ton's* standards, she had also been cursed with curves that made for a somewhat robust silhouette, and a wild halo of long, wiry hair that never did as it was told. Her nose was high and proud, sometimes giving her a haughtiness she did not actually possess, while her lips looked like they were recovering from a bee sting, and her brown eyes were unusual, in that the iris was so dark it blended with her pupil, lacking warmth. Add to that her considerable spread of freckles, a strong chin, and plump cheeks, and she was not grotesque by any means, but she was not beautiful in the classical sense.

“He is yours, Dear Sister,” Frances said, refusing to show any hint of self-pity. “I would not want him, even if he were the most handsome gentleman in Christendom. Although, he had better be as delightful as I have heard, or I shall be having stern words with the gossipmongers who spread such tales of wonder.”

Emmeline seemed to relax and moved to the window seat, so she could keep a close eye on the driveway and the winding road, just visible beyond it, through the densely congregated oaks and chestnuts and elders. Meanwhile, Frances returned to her position in front of the looking glass, where Cariad immediately set to work, resuming the impossible task of getting Frances’ hair to stay in the right place.

“Why are we not permitted to choose, Sister?” Emmeline broke the quiet, peppered only by Cariad’s muttered frustrations.

Frances and the maid exchanged a knowing look in the mirror’s reflection. “It is not our destiny, my Sweet Emmy.”

“But *why* not, and why am I betrothed before you? You are the older sister. You should, by rights, be the first to wed.” Emmeline did not turn to look at Frances, keeping her gaze fixed on the driveway.

Frances felt her chest constrict, made worse by the sympathetic pat of Cariad’s hand against her shoulder. “That was not my destiny. It is customary for younger sons to marry the younger daughters of other lords, and as Lord Croxley is five years my junior, and his older brother was already betrothed, I was... left out of the betrothal rigmarole. Quite happy to be so, too!”

It was not a lie. In her supposed “prime,” shortly after coming out into Society at eight-and-ten, she had hoped someone suitable might enchant her, and they would announce their engagement and be contentedly, if not ecstatically, married. The natural order, expected of an Earl’s daughter.

But it was not to be, and I do not imagine it ever will— Frances observed her reflection, wondering what it was that repulsed gentlemen with such reliability. She did not consider herself ugly, though she had heard the word tossed in her direction often enough. Unusual, certainly. Intriguing, perhaps. Confident in her own skin... most of the time.

“Are you?” Emmeline twirled one of her framing fronds.

“Am I what, Sister?” Frances put a hand up to Cariad, surrendering to the knowledge that there was nothing more to be done to wrangle her hair into submission. To keep applying heat and oil and bejeweled slides would only make her look like she had slapped a greasy, overdecorated, singed wreath onto her head.

Emmeline shrugged. “Are you truly happy not to be betrothed?”

“Goodness gracious, yes!” Frances declared, a little too enthusiastically. “Think of all I shall be able to do without the burden of a husband. Why, I could become a mysterious hermit in the woods, surrounded by dogs and books, oft mistaken for a witch. The village children will dare one another to creep as close as they can to my cottage, and I shall play their game, bursting out of the door and waving my broom at them!”

Emmeline laughed softly. “Someone will marry you, Sister. You do not have to be a hermit or pretend to be a witch.” Her brow furrowed with sadness. “I would not want you to be left alone in such a way.”

“*Someone will marry you—*” Frances knew the words were not ill-meant, so she did not take them as such. Nevertheless, it steeled her resolve to remain a happy, content spinster, rather than be left to sift through the dregs of Society’s bachelor barrel and marry whichever one floated to the surface first.

“I *adore* solitude, Emmy. You know this to be true,” Frances assured. “At a ball, one can always find me wandering the gardens alone, having escaped the chaperone, or hiding away in an empty study, judging the host’s collection of literature. Failing that, I will be underneath a table where the servants are preparing food, stealing the choicest morsels. I enjoy *your* company, and that is all.”

Cariad sniffed.

“And yours, Cariad, of course.” Frances gave her a light nudge in the arm. “Though you will be stuck with me far longer, after my dear sister has journeyed off to begin her new life with Lord Croxley. Indeed, I fear you shall have to come to my witch’s cottage with me.”

Cariad pulled a displeased face. “I’ll quit before then, M’lady, if you

don't mind my saying. I can't abide dogs, even those I've been around a long while."

"How can you say such a thing?" Frances protested, thinking of her two beloved bulldogs—Eris and Piglet. "Dogs are wondrous creatures. I have never encountered a dog I did not like. People, on the other hand—I have encountered plenty I do not care for. Indeed, they say that a dog can tell if someone is trustworthy or not, and I happen to have faith in my dogs' opinions."

Emmeline smiled. "You know Dear Cariad is terrified of Eris and Piglet. She does not abhor them; she fears them. There is a difference. I think, deep down, she is fond of them."

"I am *not*," Cariad retorted, shuddering. "I'll never forgive Piglet for chewing up M'lady's hairbrush, or what she did to my shoe."

The three women erupted into laughter, for it was an infamous tale among the household, and it never failed to bring some levity to even the tensest of atmospheres.

"Perhaps Piglet was afraid of your shoe," Frances wheezed, trying to stifle her hearty laugh by pressing a hand to her mouth. Her parents had always scolded her, telling her she laughed in too masculine a fashion, and the habit of trying to soften the sound was a difficult one to break.

Just then, the distinct sound of a horse's nicker drifted through the sound of their laughter. The three women froze, waiting for the telltale clatter of carriage wheels. This time, there was no mistaking the noise.

"Is it... them?" Frances' stomach prepared to drop, for she had tried to put on a courageous face throughout the announcement of this betrothal, and she had done everything within her power to comfort and reassure Emmeline that all would be well. But the truth was, Emmeline would gain a husband from this match, while Frances would lose a sister.

What will I do here, without you? For while it was true that Frances relished solitude, that solitude rarely excluded Emmeline. They had been an inseparable pair from the moment Emmeline was born, and Frances realized she had never actually known true solitude. The

loneliness of one.

Emmeline gave a slow, nervous nod. "They are here." She sucked in a sharp breath. "I suppose there is no time to flee, now."

“Might you smile and pretend you are enthused for me?”

Peter Jones—the Marquess of Croxley, and younger brother to Andrew, the Duke of Reeves—remarked with a wry smile, from the opposite squabs of the stifling carriage.

Andrew feigned a dim-witted grin. “Why, Brother, I *am* thrilled for you. I can think of no better way to spend a lifetime than chained in holy matrimony to a girl you last saw when you were knee high to our mother, forgoing all other beauties for fear of burning in the eternal fires of the hereafter.” He smirked. “I hear she is as pretty and docile as a cow, and equally as intelligent.”

“At least you are indulging in your famed wit here, and not within the walls of Fernside Manor,” Peter replied with sarcastic disapproval. “For one who never forgoes a beauty, you are awfully severe when it comes to your judgment upon young ladies. *I* hear she is delightful and engaging.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Of course you have. No one would dare tell you, to your face, that you were about to wed a dolt without a smidgen of sense or wit.”

Peter opened his mouth, as if to protest, but Andrew cut him off before he could.

“As for my severity in judgment—you would think as I do if you had the experience I possess,” he continued. “It is gathered evidence, and you ought to take heed of my wisdom and the sacrifices I have made in the pursuit of uncovering the mysteries of women. I can assure you, here and now, that the greatest secret among womankind is... there

are no secrets. They are precisely what they appear to be. No mystique can remain when you have heard them gossiping away to one another like twittering birds.”

Peter shook his head in mock despair. “It is exactly this attitude that will see you a perpetual bachelor. Are you not embarrassed that your younger brother is to wed before you? Do you not think it is time for you to do your duty as a Duke—as Father wanted?”

A steeliness came over Andrew’s face at the mention of such a man, and a familiar disgust twisted up one side of his mouth. “I am not embarrassed,” he said, swallowing the acrid bile in his throat. “You are far more suited to marriage than I am. Why should it not be you? I care not for what tradition says, as you well know.”

“You will be pleasant, though, will you not?” Peter shifted anxiously upon the velvet and adjusted the lapels of his freshly tailored tailcoat. Indeed, all of his garments were newly crafted, much to Andrew’s amusement: the poor soul looked terribly uncomfortable.

Andrew shrugged. “I will be polite enough, do not worry.”

“When you say such things, I *do* worry,” Peter replied, with a sigh.

Despite their different approaches to life and much of what existed within it, there was no mistaking that the two men were brothers. Both had the same thick, black hair, though Andrew wore his shorter than Society’s fashion thought proper. They possessed the same almond-shaped eyes with defined, long lashes, but where Andrew’s were a dark blue, like the bottom of a sea pool, Peter’s were much brighter and lighter, akin to the shallows.

Thanks to a long-standing competitiveness, both brothers were athletic and tall, with broad shoulders that made them a tailor’s dream to dress. Still, Andrew liked to remind his brother that he was the taller of the two, and his shoulders were just that little bit broader. That being said, he had decided, many moons ago, that he was the only one who was allowed to tease Peter. If anyone else so much as uttered a remark about Peter that Andrew did not care for, the fool would feel the lash of his tongue.

“Ah, how quaint—we have an audience.” Andrew glanced out of the carriage window, bored by the sight of greenery and trees and

endlessly undulating hills, and noticed three faces peering down from one of the approaching Manor's upper windows.

Peter lurched forward, practically throwing himself across Andrew's thighs to take a look for himself. "Where? Is it her?"

You should not make an idiot out of yourself for a woman, Peter— Andrew contemplated chiding his brother aloud, but decided to hold his tongue.

"Let us both hope she is not the one on the right," he said instead, as he observed the ghoulish apparitions with casual interest. After all, as they were to reside here for a month, for the simplicity of being close by throughout the belated betrothal party and the wedding celebrations, he figured it would serve him well to scout any resident beauties to add to his ever-changing menagerie.

Peter squinted. "No, I think she is the young lady to the left. I remember, even as a child, she had the most vivid, bronze-toned hair."

"You know what they say about red-headed women, Brother." Andrew chuckled.

"No, but I am sure you are going to enlighten me," Peter grumbled, straining to get a better glimpse of the curious women.

Andrew pushed his brother backward and shifted further up the squab, so Peter could take his place by the carriage window. The younger man immediately took up the position, trying to peek out from behind the small curtain that Andrew wished he had drawn, so he would not have had to look upon so many tedious shades of green.

"First, it is well known that they possess wretchedly fiery tempers." Andrew laughed, enjoying himself. "As such, you would do well to avoid angering your future wife, or you might find holes cut in the backside of your trousers." He paused for dramatic effect. "In Ancient Egypt, red hair was considered unlucky, so you should be wary of that, too. And let us not forget the Greeks, who believed that those of flaming hair would transform into vampires upon the event of their death. So, be sure to guard your neck, Brother."

Peter shot him a withering look over his shoulder. "I suppose you

think you are amusing? You are meant to be calming my nerves, Brother, not increasing them.”

“I cannot lie to you, Dear Boy. You must brace yourself for the fierce-tempered, misfortunate, wild-spirited vampire who is to be your wife,” Andrew teased. To his mind, marriage was the true blood-sucking, life-draining vampire, and he would not have hesitated to set the entire institution ablaze.

Peter carried on with his outward observation. “I do believe that is her, Brother. One of the other two must be her older sister, though I am uncertain about the identity of the third. A friend or a maid, perhaps? No... they are all standing much too close together for one of them to be a maid.”

“A friend?” That piqued Andrew’s interest, demanding a second look.

However, when Andrew leaned over to do so, the three faces at the window had vanished, leaving him with a rather uneasy sensation. He abhorred making pleasantries with other respected families and peers. It had suited him very well to be the eldest son of a Duke, lacking the responsibilities of running an actual Dukedom, but people had a tendency to die, and his father had not been exempt from that.

Even if the Devil himself was likely afraid of taking you to those fiery depths.

Less than a minute later, the carriage rolled to a jolting halt outside the wide, marble porch steps of Fernside Manor. Lichen-speckled columns flanked the porch, and white-veined ivy climbed the red brick exterior, where nature was fruitlessly attempting to claim back the human-forged structure. It was not the worst manor Andrew had ever seen in his life, but it had a newness that reeked of false grandeur.

At least that means it probably lacks the ghosts of Reeves Hall—

“Well then, let us stride into your future, Dear Boy.” Andrew emerged from the stifling heat of the carriage first and took a moment to dab at his brow with his handkerchief. He did not care what the Earl and Countess of Fernside thought of him, but he was proud enough of his looks not to walk in there with sweat dripping down the side of his face.

Peter had visibly paled by the time he joined his brother on the gravel drive. "I feel rather unwell, Brother."

"It is only the heat," Andrew clapped Peter on the back, "and the impending dread of what you are about to enter into. As I have said on countless occasions, it is not too late for you to run." He laughed, for he was not serious. Someone had to marry to continue and secure the family lineage, and that someone was *not* going to be Andrew. He had already made that abundantly clear.

Peter mustered a faint smile. "What if I were to suggest that you marry Lady Emmeline instead? I will tell them you have had a change of heart and are eager to be wed."

"You will do no such thing, or you may forget the allowance I have promised you," Andrew retorted: his chest momentarily gripped by a sensation of suffocation. This was his one rebellion against a mother and father who had demanded everything of him, and he would not relinquish that for anything. Not even Peter's freedom to revel in bachelorhood.

Peter chuckled. "A jest, Brother. A mere jest."

"Yes, well, you would be surprised how many times something said in jest turned out to have a snippet of truth within it," Andrew muttered, leading his brother up the porch steps to the front door. Behind them, the footmen and valets and servants began the tiresome process of unloading luggage from the three carriages Andrew had brought for the occasion.

Andrew's hand had barely touched the brass knocker, when the door swung open to reveal the stiff, stern face of a butler. Nevertheless, Andrew spotted the faint shimmer of anxiety in the older man's eyes. It did not surprise him: he was accustomed to people finding him intimidating.

The butler bowed. "Your Grace, My Lord, it is a pleasure to welcome you to Fernside Manor. May I direct you to the drawing room, while the Earl and Countess are sent for?"

"I do not know—may you?" Andrew smiled. He rarely missed an opportunity to be facetious.

The butler balked, prompting Peter to come to the rescue.

“You must forgive my brother; he enjoys a poorly-timed jest. Please, do take us to the drawing room so we might await Lord and Lady Fernside,” he urged, though Andrew could tell his brother was keen to meet his future bride.

The butler bowed once more, before leading the way to the promised drawing room. The fine furnishings and decorative selections met with Andrew’s approval—not too gaudy or crowded, and the velvet settee looked particularly comfortable after a lengthy journey in the carriage. His gaze admired the cream-colored wallpaper, embellished with golden flowers that seemed frozen in an eternal, unfurling Spring.

“You promised you would behave!” Peter hissed, once the butler had gone to fetch the family.

Andrew cracked a grin. “I said I would be polite enough.”

“You terrified that poor fellow,” Peter chided, twisting and shuffling through a veritable revue of awkward sitting positions. He settled on a stiff arrangement; his thighs pressed together, his palms face down on his knees, his back bent forward, as if he intended to spring up at any moment.

Feeling a twinge of guilt, Andrew sat beside his brother and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Relax, Brother. I have made my jokes. You will not hear another unsavory peep out of me.” He smiled. “And I am sure that, among shackles, Lady Emmeline will epitomize some of the nicest to be found. Why, you might not even notice you are a prisoner. Better still, you might not even mind.”

“Stop,” Peter whispered, in a pleading tone, “you must stop.”

Andrew held a hand up in surrender. “I have, I promise.” He drew his fingertips across his lips. “Not another word.”

He hoped he would be able to keep such a vow of silence, for Peter’s sake, but he had made a grander promise to himself, after he had come of age, that he would never again allow anything to keep him quiet. The revelation had gotten him into his fair share of trouble, but, once Peter was married, he would not have to worry about the Reeves

reputation being tarnished. If Peter did not like it, it would be up to him to shine their standing back to its bygone sheen of respectability.

I would be happy to watch it all crumble, in truth, as long as I knew Peter would be well taken care of.

His thoughts were interrupted by a ruckus outside the drawing room door—the sound of a henpecking mother harassing the future bride to the front of the congregation. Indeed, it appeared the games were about to begin and Andrew, for one, could not wait for them to be over.

“Remember, Brother, the most important thing I have taught you,” he murmured, adopting an expression of the utmost sincerity.

“What was that?” Peter gulped loudly. “Goodness, I cannot remember a thing! My mind has emptied entirely.”

Andrew flashed a mischievous grin. “Guard your neck.”

Deep down, however, a different warning whispered... *“And your heart.”*

Andrew sat back, adopting an air of indifference, as a quartet entered. As expected, their most-beautiful, most-enchancing member stood at the front of the diamond of four bodies.

Lady Emmeline, I assume.

He let his gaze wander to the other three, for Lady Emmeline was his brother's concern. Lady Fernside was a plain-looking woman of squat stature, with streaked hair of copper and white that had been fashioned into a severe bun, making the locks look as though they had been lacquered onto her head. Evidently, they were too unruly to be allowed any freedom. Her watery blue eyes were watchful and nervous, looking firmly at Peter.

Lord Fernside, on the other hand, was monumentally tall. He stooped instinctively, likely knowing that, if he did not, his head would knock into the lintel of the drawing room door. Much of his sandy-colored hair remained atop his head, with two patches of light gray above his temples that streaked backward in an odd band, connecting at the nape of his neck. His eyes, unlike his wife's, were a dark brown.

And you must be the unfortunate surplus daughter. What high hopes they must have had for you, if they did not negotiate a betrothal the very moment you took your first breath.

Andrew discreetly observed the young woman. One might have generously called her handsome, rather than beautiful, and she was certainly a peculiar creature to behold. For one thing, she towered over her mother and younger sister, and possessed a stocky ungainliness that made her pale-yellow dress seem unfeminine and ill-

fitting, though Andrew could find nothing amiss in the actual execution. Indeed, it made him wary to stand up, lest she tower over him, too.

“Your Grace, Lord Croxley, what a delight to have you in our humble abode,” Lady Fernside spoke first, sketching a curtsy in the direction of the brothers. “Please, allow me to introduce my daughters, Lady Emmeline and Lady Frances.”

Even her name is masculine... the poor thing never stood a chance.

Andrew hid a smirk and dipped his head in a vague attempt at a nod. “It is our pleasure, Ladies.”

Peter dipped his head much lower. “Thank you for welcoming us into your home. It is utterly breathtaking, and I am eager to explore these wondrous grounds in the weeks to come, providing I am not otherwise engaged.”

“You *are* otherwise eng—” Andrew and Lady Frances both halted abruptly, the same words coming out of both of their mouths. Their eyes met: Frances flashing a hostile stare, while Andrew’s brow arched in an expression of surprised amusement.

Brash laughter interrupted the awkward moment, hailing from Lady Fernside’s lips. “How droll! My eldest has such a... rare sense of humor. It is not often there is someone who shares it.”

Andrew heard the subtext in the older woman’s words: her eldest daughter had a sense of humor that few found amusing and was likely a source of embarrassment to the family. Although, had Lady Frances been a man, Andrew imagined the entire room would have been in raptures. He knew that because he had anticipated the approving laughter which Lady Frances had stolen away.

“Shall we sit?” Lord Fernside stepped in, guiding his daughters to the opposite settee. Andrew noticed that Lady Frances diverged of her own accord, choosing the armchair by the fireplace instead. Meanwhile, Lady Fernside perched next to Lady Emmeline, while Lord Fernside hemmed her in on the other side.

“I have sent for a tea service,” Lady Fernside said, in that jarring, shrill tone of nervousness. “I thought you might be thirsty after your

lengthy journey from Norfolk.”

Andrew snorted. “Not at all. We had our own tea service in the carriage. I do not know how the servants managed to keep it warm, or how we stopped it sloshing everywhere and staining the velvet.”

“Oh... is that so?” Lady Fernside fidgeted: her cheeks flushing with pink. Clearly, she could not read any speck of humor upon Andrew’s blank face. A skill he had spent many hours refining in his youth.

Peter exhaled shakily. “You are too kind, Lady Fernside. Tea would be delightful. We are both parched.” His eyes were drawn to the remarkable beauty of Lady Emmeline, who radiated like the angel she resembled, with a halo of heavenly flames around her face and sweet, light-brown eyes that showed no hint of sourness. The very opposite of her haughty sister.

How lucky you are, Peter... and what a catastrophe I have gladly missed. I daresay I have never been grateful to my father until this moment.

Andrew inwardly cringed at the prospect of finding himself betrothed to Lady Frances, as he subtly searched her face for any redeeming features. She was not utterly horrible to behold, but her manner and demeanor seemed to encourage the male gaze to turn away, as if she was sending out an invisible warning that she was not to be trifled with.

“We are thankful you accepted our invitation, Your Grace,” Lady Fernside drew Andrew’s attention away from the older daughter. “It is such a relief, knowing you will be in attendance throughout the proceedings, and the celebrations preceding the wedding.”

Andrew chuckled. “That is a lot of proceeding and preceding, Lady Fernside.”

“Oh... yes, how amusing!” Lady Fernside fanned herself furiously, appearing perturbed by his direct wit.

“Indeed, I hope you *would* want us to be in attendance throughout the proceedings, or it would make for a rather one-sided wedding, would it not? There can be no wedding without a husband, unless I am mistaken?” he added, toying with her a little more. He did not wish to be unkind, but, as Pete often said, he had a sickness of the tongue that

prevented him from knowing when to stop with his jokes and japes.

Lady Fernside's eyes widened like a hare hearing the snap of a branch underfoot. "Mm... yes, that is true. You really are very clever, Your Grace. I cannot tell if you are jesting or not."

"One should always let everyone in on the joke, Your Grace, otherwise it can feel rather like cruelty," Lady Frances interjected, rather unexpectedly. "However, I quite agree with my mother—you have such a stern face. I doubt anyone can tell when you are teasing, which is likely part of the thrill, is it not?"

Andrew stared at her. "Pardon?"

"A jest is only a jest if others are laughing. A jest for your own pleasure turns everyone else, rather ironically, into the jester—a curious twist of language to be discovered there. Anyway, that is unpleasant for everyone but you. There must be some enjoyment in it for you, or you would not do it," she responded, rendering him speechless. No one, man or woman, had ever spoken to him like that before, with such... confidence. Or was it arrogance? He could not tell.

His stare intensified. "I meant nothing by it, Lady Frances. If you found my remark distasteful, that is no fault of mine. You have chosen to feel slighted, disregarding the intent."

"Is the intent not decided by the recipient?" She was quick to reply. So quick and clever, in fact, that it left Andrew's head reeling. "Humor, after all, may only be discerned by the audience. If no one laughs, it cannot be deemed amusing."

His eyes narrowed, suddenly finding her entirely repulsive, though it had nothing to do with her looks. "I do not believe that—"

"Do I have something upon my face, Your Grace?" Lady Frances interrupted, before he could finish, making his hackles rise even further. He was a guest in this Manor, and he did not appreciate being spoken down to by an Earl's unwed, clearly unwanted daughter.

Now, I rather understand why you have no husband.

He tried not to give his irritation away. "Why would you say that,

Lady Frances? Did you eat something particularly messy before you came to meet with us?"

"Not at all. I was simply curious as to why you were staring at me, though I appreciate your attempt at discretion," she fired back, to his increasing astonishment. "You need not be polite, Your Grace. Is it my nose? My chin? My freckles? I have heard it all."

Lady Fernside looked as though she might faint, while Lord Fernside shot a warning look at his daughter. Lady Emmeline and Peter, on the other hand, did not appear to notice what was happening around them. They were too intent on gazing at one another.

Andrew blinked. "You are... very talkative, that is all, with many opinions."

"Ah, opinionated! I shall chalk up another tally for that attribute." Lady Frances caught her father's glare and forced a smile onto her lips. "I am teasing, Your Grace. Do not mind me and my idle chatter." A defiance in her unsettling, impossibly dark eyes, dark brown enough to appear black—lacking any hint of a discernable iris— suggested she did not mean a word she said.

Lady Fernside nodded effusively. "Yes, do not mind our dear Frances. As I said, she has a... rare sense of humor."

"Indeed she does," Andrew replied quietly, feeling uneasy. For the first time in his life, he had been at a loss for several retorts, and he did not like that one bit. He liked it even less that a woman had bested him.

Let us hope you can take what you give, Lady Frances. Do not forget, we have a month to spend in one another's company.

He smiled at her as sweetly as he was able, knowing that, by the time he was done with his own jests and teasing, she would be pleading for him to leave as soon as possible. A gauntlet had been laid before him, and he never refused a challenge.

“I can hardly breathe, Frances!” Emmeline paced back and forth in front of the bedchamber window, already dressed and preened to perfection for the dinner they were due to have that evening.

Frances smiled, not even bothering to check her reflection. “You find him so intolerable you feel suffocated? Would you like me to fashion that rope out of blankets for you, before we are called to dinner?”

“What? Goodness, no!” Emmeline skidded to a standstill, clasping a hand to her chest. “He is... lovely, Sister. I realize I have known him for all of five minutes, and have spoken perhaps ten words to him, but... he seems so... lovely!”

Frances wagged a finger. “Seems, Madam?... I know not ‘seems’.” She rephrased some “Hamlet” for her sister, knowing it to be her favorite whenever they visited the theater in London or Bath.

“Nay, it is!” Emmeline chirped, filling in the missing middle part and flashing a gleeful smile. “What did you think of him, Sister? I trust your opinion above all others.”

Frances sighed. “I think you shall both be deliriously happy, though you will never get anything done for you will spend all of your waking hours staring at one another in utter adoration. Indeed, you should both remember to also watch where you are walking, or you might find yourselves with many knocks and bruises.”

“Were we gazing so obviously?” Emmeline’s mouth fell open in dismay, bringing a laugh to Frances’ throat.

“You were, but it was a glorious sight to behold. He is handsome, you are beautiful; why should you not gape at one another? I only wish his brother was as pleasant.” Frances could not resist the thinly veiled barb, for she was still simmering over the arrogant, unfeeling, unbothered nature of the Duke.

Emmeline flinched. “Mama is rather displeased with you. I heard her whispering to Papa in their chamber, when I went to ask for Mama’s jade hairpin.”

“She should not be,” Frances protested. “I might have spoken impolitely, but only because that oaf was making Mama uncomfortable. I could see the perspiration beading on her brow. She is not some groundling to be mocked and played with, when she was merely trying to be kind.”

After a lifetime hardening her outer shell to the comments of others, and twisting jibes back onto those who had spoken them, very little could upset Frances. However, when it came to her family, she was always ready to spring to their defense. Perhaps she was overly sensitive, at times, but she would have preferred that over indifference or ignoring remarks all together.

Emmeline nodded sympathetically. “But he is a Duke, and he is my betrothed’s brother. Please, promise me you will not be too coarse toward him, while he is here.”

“I have embarrassed you.” That stung Frances more than any insult the Duke could throw at her. “I am so very sorry, Emmy. Forgive me. Of course, I will bite my tongue from this moment onward.”

Emmeline crossed to where Frances stood, by the window, and took hold of her hand. “I found it rather amusing, in truth,” she whispered conspiratorially, “but I cannot risk anything breaking this betrothal. The Duke is a powerful gentleman. One word from him could end this.”

Then he should learn to be nicer to those who are hosting him. True to her promise, Frances held her tongue.

“I will not do anything to jeopardize your future, Emmy,” she vowed instead. “Why, I shall even deign to flatter the wretch at dinner. Amends will be made.”

Emmeline brightened. "Thank you, Sister!" She wrapped her arms around Frances, hugging her tight. "I do not know what I shall do without you. Maybe, if I ask very nicely, Lord Croxley will allow you to come and stay at his Manor with us."

"I would not dare to intrude upon love's paradise," Frances replied, hiding the sorrow that was forming a lump in her throat. "But I will visit, and I will visit so often I might as well reside there. Nothing will keep me away."

She would not think of the day that Emmeline departed Fernside Manor to begin married life. Not yet. It was much too soon, and if she began shedding tears now, her eyes would be dried prunes by the time Emmeline actually left.

At that moment, the loud chimes of a gong rippled through the bedchamber, summoning the young women to dinner. Frances was already dreading it, but she would hold her chin up high and make civil conversation with the Duke, no matter the battering her pride would take. At the very least, it would please her mother and father, and she did not want them to despair of her any more than they already did.



Alas, seated beside the Duke at the dining table, it became clear that the fellow did not intend to let Frances off the hook for her earlier behavior. Indeed, enduring such a dinner, with so many temptations to retort and remark, might well have been the greatest challenge of Frances' life.

"Did you mean to get some of the watercress soup in your mouth or are you indulging in some new fashion I have not heard about?" he said, eyeing the splashes upon her chin and bosom. It did not matter what she did—how she held her spoon, how often she dabbed with her napkin, how far away from the table she was—soup never failed to splash onto her of its own mischievous volition.

Smiling tightly, Frances trailed her napkin across the offending spots. "It is rather rude of a gentleman to gawp so openly at a lady's bosom that he would see the soup she has spilled." Her mind yelled at her to bite her tongue, but the impulse was too strong. "You should have dabbed it away with your own hand, if you found it so upsetting.

Now, *that* would be a worthy scandal.”

“I can ill afford another one of those,” he replied, smirking in a way that annoyed her, though she could not explain why. Many people accused her of being haughty, due to the proud height of her nose, but he emanated haughtiness without having any unfortunately sized features to blame.

She nodded sagely. “I did not wish to embarrass you by mentioning it, nor would my mother approve if she discovered I read the scandal sheets. You are most prominent, Your Grace. They might as well call it the “Reeves Sheets” and be done with everyone else.”

“You must tell me, how am I depicted? Have they appropriately captured my roguish charms?” He seemed to flounder for a moment, as a flicker of irritation glinted through his dark-blue eyes. As retorts went, it *was* a rather feeble one, but Frances would not point that out.

She chuckled for the benefit of the others at the table, pretending she was having a lovely time. “One needs to *have* roguish charm in order to have it depicted, Your Grace. I would blush as red as a beetroot if I were to relay everything they say about you. I imagine you would, too.”

Cease this! For your sister's sake, restrain yourself! she scolded privately, feeling that she was treading across a very dangerous line.

“I doubt I would be able to see such a flush upon your cheeks, Lady Frances. Your freckles already give you a persistent redness, or perhaps I have already made you blush, and they are merely disguising it?” He took his crystal glass and sipped from the rich red wine within it, holding Frances’ unwavering gaze.

A genuine laugh bubbled up her throat, for it was one of the more unique insults she had heard. “Would you believe that I have never spent more than a few moments in sunlight without a parasol? Indeed, I avoid it with such vigor that, for a time, my old governess feared I was a vampire.” She smirked. “Yet, I have borne these freckles since birth, and they have only multiplied with the years. It is rather unfair, do you not think?”

“They do say that those born with red hair have vampire blood within them,” he replied, intriguing her for the first time since his arrival.

“You know of the myth? Those Greeks should have been more concerned with swans transforming back into Zeus and dishonoring their maidens, instead of fretting over those with red hair.” She tutted. “Although, I cannot argue with the Egyptians. They heralded us as unlucky, and I was certainly unlucky when it came to my height, my freckles, my heroic chin, my proud nose, my wayward locks. My sister, however, well... there is not an unfortunate bone in her body.”

The ghost of a true smile formed upon the Duke’s lips. “You are well read in the ancient worlds, then?”

“My mother forbade me from reading those novels every young lady adores, these days, but if I framed my desire to read “indecent literature” as historical education, she had no qualms,” Frances explained. “She would faint if she indulged in some of those Ancient Greek tales.”

His smile widened. “It is unusual to happen upon a young lady with such swift wit. One might mistake you for a male counterpart.”

“Ah, well there are several things that render that impossible, Your Grace,” she shot back, swallowing the note of defensiveness in her voice. She would not allow this rude fellow to splinter a chip in her armor by tapping at her insecurities. If anything, it made her all the more determined to shock him into silence.

He blinked rapidly, suggesting success. “And what might they be?”

“I think it is rather obvious, Your Grace. All you need do is resume your search for the spilled droplets of watercress soup, and you will understand my meaning,” she replied evenly. “Although, you should attempt to be more discreet, lest someone think you a terrible lech.”

This time, his eyebrows shot up and he immediately glanced away. “Perhaps, you have read too much of the Ancient Greeks,” he muttered, spooning up his last mouthful of soup. “There is a difference between wit and a crass tongue. One is admirable, the other is not.”

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but when your name fills the scandal sheets from front to back, you are ill situated to offer comment on what is admirable,” she mumbled in return.

He snorted. “I suppose I cannot argue with that.”

“You cannot? Then, whatever shall we speak about through the next... five courses?” Frances sat back in her chair and sipped at her wine, willing it to soften her spikiness, for Emmeline’s benefit.

He took his glass and emulated her. “I can ask you what you make of the dish, you can tell me what you find to be delicious, then we can eat in silence. Between courses, we might comment upon the weather, or what we have recently seen at the theater or the opera, or what proper thing we have read.”

“It has been rather wet this summer,” she said stiffly, observing the rest of the table. Her mother and father were beckoning the servants to clear the table for the next course, while keeping one eye on their youngest daughter and her betrothed. The couple were deep in conversation, smiling fondly at one another, their shallow bowls of soup more or less untouched. A sure sign that the conversation was more satisfying than any dish that could be placed before them.

The Duke nodded. “There has not been much rain at all in Norfolk.”

“How awful.”

He frowned. “I do not find that to be the case. I prefer my summers dry and warm.”

“Ah, but nothing can bloom in arid conditions,” Frances insisted. “Perhaps, that is why your brother has come here, where the landscape is lush and verdant, so something beautiful might blossom.”

It might also explain why you have a shriveled heart, Your Grace. Blessedly, she did not dare to say that part out loud for, in truth, she did not know this gentleman at all. There could well have been a different reason for his obvious arrogance and unpleasantness.

The Duke drained his glass. “That might be true, but too much watering can cause a blooming plant to rot at the root. It will wither and die just as easily as it would do in fierce heat.”

“Then, let us hope that your brother and my sister are neither overly watered nor starved of rain,” she replied, turning her gaze to the clock on the mantelpiece, and urging the hands to move quicker around the delicate face. With five courses and many hours still to go, it was going to be an intolerably long night.

Desperate for some cool air upon his face, to slough away the sweat and strain of the past four hours, Andrew wandered through the shadowed peace of Fernside Manor's pretty gardens. They were smaller than those of Reeves Hall, but they carried a quaint charm that the excessive gardens of his sprawling Hall lacked.

Pausing to sit upon a stone bench, he exhaled from deep inside his lungs, as if expelling all the animosity and pollution of the dining table. It might have worked, had it not been for a statue of a Greek god, poised up ahead, that dragged his mind straight back to the battle he had just fought with Lady Frances. Even now, he did not know who had won, though he had a sneaking suspicion it was not him.

If I had been the victor, I would not still be mulling over my words, wondering what I could have said to best her.

"I knew I should not have come," he muttered to the starry night, glittering with thousands upon thousands of constellations. Even they reminded him of her, and her spread of freckles. "I should have arrived for the wedding, and not a moment before."

He leaned forward and held his head in his hands, feeling like he needed to scrub himself clean. In truth, there was a part of him that was ashamed of his behavior. What did it matter if she was quick-witted? It did not mean he lacked any. Why had he insulted her freckles, when he tended to find them endearing? Why had he fought back so hard, when she had merely defended her mother during that first meeting in the drawing room? It had taken some thinking, but he had come to the latter realization between leaving that room and

coming back down to dine.

I promised myself I would not engage in that sort of repartee with her again, yet that dinner was nothing but repartee—

His thoughts were disturbed by an unnerving sound, coming from the bushes in the distance. A rush of footfalls, heavy and eager, followed by the loud rustle of undergrowth being trampled. His head shot up in alarm, his hand reaching for his cane, in case he needed to protect himself from an attack.

A moment later, two lumbering beasts exploded from the bushes, charging directly for Andrew. His heart seized in his chest as he watched the shadows approach, his hand tightening around the top of the cane. Could foxes grow that big? Did the Chiltern Hills have some secret wolves he did not know about? Or was this something else entirely?

His clenched muscles relaxed in the blink of an eye, as two robust, bow-legged bulldogs barreled up to him. The largest was entirely white, aside from a black patch over its right eye, while the smaller was a light brown, with white feet and a white streak that ran from the start of its snub snout to the tip of its wagging tail. The hounds jumped up, resting their paws on his knees as pink tongues lolled from the corners of their mouths.

“Well, well, who are you?” Andrew’s face broke into a smile as he scratched the dogs behind their droopy ears. They panted appreciatively, their tails wagging so hard that Andrew could hear them vibrating the air. “Do you like that? Are you itchy behind those sweet ears? Did I get the right spot?”

He had always longed to have dogs of his own, giving them the run of Reeves Hall so the echoing hallways would not seem so empty, but he had never gotten around to purchasing any. He supposed he would never be able to get rid of his father’s voice in his head, declaring that, “No foul beast is setting foot in this Hall. What do you think we are—commoners in a lowly hovel?” Still, he reveled in visiting the hunting dogs that lived on the property, whenever he could.

Just then, a third rustle of twigs and undergrowth, the footfalls slightly more labored, turned his attention back to the bushes in the distance. A taller, less-beastly figure stumbled through, with all

manner of foliage caught in her unruly hair, and a healthy smearing of mud ruining one side of her dress and concealing half of her face.

“Eris, Piglet, where the devil are you?” Lady Frances called desperately, plucking bits of grass and twigs from her hair and dress. Though nothing could be done to salvage the dress.

Andrew chuckled despite himself, hearing the names of the two cheerful dogs. “Which one of you is which, hm?” he asked the bulldogs, who nudged him for more scratches.

Evidently hearing him speak, Lady Frances froze. “Is someone there? Show yourself!” In the darkness of the gardens, Andrew supposed it would have been difficult for her to see him. Nor did she have the nose to scent him out, the way the bulldogs had.

“Over here!” he shouted, not knowing why, when he was out in the gardens to try and avoid her. “The dogs, too.”

Lady Frances skirted around the statue of the Greek god, and came to another standstill as she set eyes upon Andrew. “They... got away from me.”

“I can see that.” He patted the white bulldog’s sturdy chest, while giving the smaller bulldog another scratch behind the ears. “They are wondrous. Do they belong to your father?”

Lady Frances whistled and the dogs instantly returned to her, leaping up into her embrace as she crouched down to their level. “No, they are mine. The brown one is Eris; the white one is Piglet.”

“Eris, as in—?”

“The Greek goddess of Chaos, yes,” she answered, with a stifled laugh. “As you can see from my muddied dress, she is well-named. The silly, beautiful thing rammed into my legs and knocked me into the fishpond that was drained last week.” She placed a kiss upon the dog’s snout. “As for Piglet, well... he looked so much like a piglet when he was a pup. There could not have been another name for him, though he resembles a boar, now.”

Andrew watched her play with the bulldogs, wondering if this soft, gentle, adoring woman could be the same one he had just quarreled

and bickered with through a four-hour dinner. Her entire face lit up with joy as she stroked the beasts and lavished them with kisses, while they kissed her in return, making her laugh as they licked her too vigorously.

“You must not!” she cried, tilting her head up. “I love you both dearly, but you are in dire need of a bath!”

Andrew squinted in confusion, intrigued by the transformation. The irritation and pride had vanished from her demeanor, softening the hard edges of her strong features. He could not deny that it was refreshing to see her intelligent eyes shining with something other than disdain, and the way she giggled and shrieked playfully added a thread of femininity and youth to the unusual tapestry of her overall being.

“I should say that you are, too, Lady Frances,” he said, in what he hoped was a sincere, yet humorous, tone.

She sat up on her haunches, patting her bulldogs. “I daresay you are right, Your Grace. The laundry maids will curse my name when they see what I have done to this lovely gown, and I have barely had it a fortnight.” She nuzzled the top of Eris’ head. “But it cannot be helped. I challenge anyone to stay upright when an enthusiastic bulldog charges into their legs.”

“Did you train them yourself?” He longed for the beasts to come to him again, but he sensed they would not leave their mistress’ side unless she gave express permission. Or she fell into another fishpond.

She smiled over the squared brow of Piglet’s forehead. “I did, though not alone. I knew nothing of how to train dogs, so I asked the kennel master to show me. He thought it was nonsensical for a young woman to have bulldogs and advised me to find a more “complementary” breed, but I knew it had to be these two. So, he eventually relented, though they do not always do as they are told.”

“They are remarkable,” Andrew conceded, treading carefully. At any moment, he expected a barbed comment from her now-smiling lips.

She tilted her head to one side, as if thinking the same thing. “Thank you, Your Grace. I am pleased you think so.” She paused. “Would you care to give them another scratch? They can never get enough

scratches. One would think they were riddled with fleas, but I assure you, they are not. They just relish attention. Mama says I spoil them, but I cannot help myself when they look up at me with those adorable eyes.”

“I should like that.” A boyish excitement came over Andrew as Lady Frances gestured forward, and the bulldogs tore away from her, running straight for him.

He tipped himself off the edge of the bench, until he was kneeling in the grass, ready to welcome their wet kisses and eager leaps. Indeed, he soon realized what Lady Frances had meant about their ability to knock someone off their feet, for he was almost toppled by their affection as they bombarded him, their powerful bodies and insistently nudging foreheads much stronger than he had anticipated.

“Have you caused your mistress some trouble, hm?” He grinned as he pretended to wrestle with the dogs, between scratches and strokes. “Look at the mess you have made of her nice gown. I hope you will give her plenty of kisses to make up for the chaos you have wrought upon her.” He pressed his forehead to that of Piglet and could not remember feeling peace like it. The dog wanted nothing from him but affection and rewarded him in kind.

Lady Frances cleared her throat. “Do you have dogs of your own, Your Grace?”

“I am afraid not, though I have always wanted to keep them,” he replied, as she came to sit close to him. “We have beagles for hunting, but they do not set foot... or paw, rather, in the Hall. I believe I will have to reconsider when I return to Norfolk.”

Lady Frances patted her lap, and Eris bounded over to her, settling into the dip between her crossed legs. The dog rested its head upon her thigh, and soon closed its eyes, evidently feeling safe and warm in her presence. “You might be even more frightening if you wandered everywhere with two large dogs at your side, though I suppose I could envision you with a fine Great Dane.”

He paused, curious. “You find me frightening?”

“Is that not the point of your... façade?” She did not look at him. Instead, she continued to stroke Eris, though the dog was clearly

asleep.

He sniffed. "There is no façade, Lady Frances. I am as you see me."

"Is that so?" She sighed softly. "What a pity."

Surprised by those three words, he forgot to stroke Piglet, prompting the hound to go and snuffle at his mistress' hand, to see if she had any treats for him. Palming a piece of dried meat, seemingly out of nowhere, she fed it to the loyal dog and scratched him under the chin as he chewed contentedly.

"Why is that a pity?" Andrew knew he should not ask, but the sentiment intrigued him too much to remain silent.

She shrugged. "With a month to go until your departure, I had hoped there might be more to you than met the eye. Indeed, it will be a rather tense month if we continue as we have been doing. But if that is who you are, I suppose I will have no choice but to brace myself for combat each day."

"We could always... attempt civility," he suggested, realizing that he would not mind speaking with this softer version of her.

A chuckle spilled over her lips. "I would have been civil, had you not made my mother feel silly. I cannot tolerate that, Your Grace, regardless of your station."

"I am aware," he said, meaning it. "Let us... begin again, as if we have not already met, and have not engaged in a four-hour conflict with one another."

In truth, he did not feel as though he were in control of the words that came out of his mouth. He should have held his ground, regardless of whether he had launched the first attack, so to speak. He should not have allowed her to alter his behavior or make him feel guilty because of it. It went against everything he had promised himself, and the exterior he had forged for himself, to protect against the charms of women.

But you are not like other women. Indeed, I do not know what to make of you at all.

“Begin again, you say?” Lady Frances rubbed her bottom lip with her forefinger, clearly contemplating the offer. “What do you think, Piglet? Shall we give His Grace another chance?”

The bulldog whined softly, thudding its tail against the grass.

“You are so easily won over, Piglet.” She clicked her tongue in an amused manner. “If he had treats in his pocket, I daresay you would follow him all the way to Norfolk.”

The bulldog gave a gruff bark of agreement, and Lady Frances’ face transformed once more into a vision of gleeful cheer. Her freckles, in such an instance, were certainly more endearing than they had been before. And while he had formerly found her dark eyes unnerving, they seemed warmer and full of life when she laughed and smiled in a genuine manner. Indeed, he was more inclined to call her handsome, without hesitation, now he had seen her this way.

“Call me strange, but I trust the opinions of my dogs,” Lady Frances declared, getting to her feet and bringing the hounds to heel. “If they believe you are worthy of a second chance, then they must see something in you that I have not yet been privy to. I will not go against them.”

Andrew smiled. “I will endeavor to be worthy of their high regard.”

“As will I, for... I know I am not blameless,” she replied, somewhat stiffly. “When the sun rises, we shall introduce ourselves once again, as if we are strangers. Now, if you will excuse me, I must wash the stench of pond off me.”

He bowed his head. “Until tomorrow, Lady Frances.”

“Apologies, sir, I have not the faintest idea who you are.” She flashed an irreverent grin. “Enjoy your walk, Stranger.”

He laughed, relishing the calm it brought with it. “I will, Miss, though you should not wander alone at night. You never know who might be lurking in the dark.”

“Ah, Good Sir, that is what my dogs are for,” she replied with a wink. Turning on her heel, she walked away from him, heading back through the gloom, toward the welcoming glow of the Manor. He

watched her go, not taking his eyes off her until she had disappeared inside.

Left alone, once more, in the quiet of the gardens, he could not find the same peace he had enjoyed before. Indeed, looking to the Manor, he felt a shudder of unease ripple through him.

I should have refused, he chided silently. *It is better to breed dislike, for that is the only way to keep myself from trouble.*

Within that thought, another jarring whisper made itself known: *“But how did she know it was a façade?”* A secret, once known, was no longer a secret, and if she could break through his thick armor and see through to the man inside, he did not know what he would do.

“I should never have come here,” he repeated. This time, for a very different reason, for he did not like the way he was already looking forward to tomorrow.

In the early hours of the morning, the sky beyond Frances' window just starting to shift from velvety black to dusky blue, she lay wide awake, staring up at the decorated tiles that bordered the ceiling. Since returning with the dogs and sinking into a hot, inviting bath to rid herself of the pond smell, she had felt oddly restless. As if she ought to be back out in the gardens, walking with the dogs until she was too exhausted to think.

Why can I not sleep? I should be dreaming merrily, yet I am tossing and turning fruitlessly.

The bulldogs, whom she had snuck into her bedchamber after her parents had retired, stirred at the side of her bed. Leaning down to see what they were doing, her breath lodged in her throat as she noticed their alert stance. They sniffed the air, their eyes fixed upon the closed chamber door.

A moment later, Frances' heart pounding in her chest, the ceramic doorknob turned, and the door creaked open with careful slowness. A shadow slipped in and set the door back in the jamb, before tiptoeing across the bare floorboards toward her bed.

"Emmy, you frightened me half to death!" Frances whispered, relaxing at the eager faced sight of her sister.

Emmeline smothered a chuckle and climbed up onto the bed, covering them both with the blankets. "I knew you would be awake. Do not ask me how. I sensed it."

The sisters huddled together, as they had done ever since they were

children. Through every season, if they were scared, excited, pensive, or brimming with gossip, they would seek one another out in the early hours of the morning, comforted by each other's sisterly presence.

"Did you have a pleasant dinner, Sister?" Frances whispered, stroking Emmeline's smooth, silky hair. "After dessert, you looked like you had only just remembered there were other people in the dining room."

Emmeline buried her face in Frances' shoulder, unleashing a squeal of delight. "I have never known someone so marvelous, Sister. He is charming, he is sweet, he is amusing, he is impossibly handsome, and he shares so many of my interests. He has already said that we will visit the botanical gardens, once the celebrations are concluded, and he wants us to visit Cornwall together. He loves the seaside as much as I do, Sister!"

"There must be some mistake, Sweet Emmy. You have clearly imagined Lord Croxley. He cannot exist as you say he does. You must have conjured him from the pages of one of those novels Mama will not let us read." Frances laughed and placed a gentle kiss on her sister's forehead. "What is he really like?"

Emmeline peered up at her sister in earnest. "He is precisely as I have described! I would not believe it, either, but it is true." She sighed contentedly. "Oh, Frances, he is wonderful. I do not know what I have done to be so blessed, but he is... perfect. Utterly perfect."

Frances did not want to dampen her sister's spirits by reminding her that, sometimes, when something appeared too good to be true, it usually was. Maybe, in this instance, Lord Croxley was some kind of exception. She certainly hoped so, for her sister's sake, and Lord Croxley had been nothing but polite and courteous toward her. Unlike his brother.

But he is not as intolerable as I thought, as long as I have the dogs with me. The thought came unbidden, surprising her. She might have promised to begin again, with civility, but she had assumed that would be easier said than done. Yet, though she had thoroughly bathed, the image of him had not been so quick to wash away.

He did not seem to be the same person, in the gardens, and my beloved dogs would not have run to him if he is as bad as I thought he was... unless they are mistaken, this once.

The memory of his hearty laughter and ready smiles were partially to blame for the sleepless night she had been suffering through. Not because she found him attractive, not really, but because he confused her. Had she encountered a changeling in the gardens? Would he be the same aloof, roguish bouncer when she encountered him again? How would they “begin again,” if they held true to their word?

“You are quiet, Sister,” Emmeline said, snapping Frances out of her bemused trance.

“I am weary, that is all.”

Emmeline sat up. “Should I not have come? I saw you sup a great deal of wine during dinner, so I was not sure if you would appreciate company, but... I wanted you to know everything I have discovered about Lord Croxley.”

“I am glad you came,” Frances assured. “You know you are always welcome to sneak into my bedchamber to tell me your gossip and your secrets. I would not be much of a sister if I turned you away because I had imbibed a little too much.”

Is that why I am so confused? Is it the wine, addling my mind? Which version of him is the real one? She supposed there was only one way to find out, and that would have to wait until the sun rose.

“Lord Croxley kept apologizing for his brother’s behavior, so it appears you are not the only one who has had to rebuke him,” Emmeline went on. “Mama overheard Lord Croxley, so I think it has placated her somewhat. I would not have been able to bear it if she scolded you, when you were only trying to help her.”

Frances sighed. “She does not want any feathers ruffled, that is all. I would have accepted a scolding graciously, if it meant smoothing over any hurt feelings.” She hesitated. “Actually, I happened upon His Grace while I was walking in the gardens tonight, with the dogs.”

“You did?” Emmeline’s eyes widened, as a mixture of emotions darted across her face: concern, curiosity, fear, and something akin to sympathy. “What did he say? He imbibed rather a lot too, though it is impolite of me to say so. Was he rude to you? Goodness, if I had known that his arrival would cause you such strife, I would have sought a different solution.”

Frances laughed softly at her sister's solemn intensity. "It was surprisingly peaceable," she insisted. "He is fond of dogs, which lightened the mood somewhat. We need speak of nothing else until he leaves in a month's time."

"How can a month seem so long and so short, all at once?" Emmeline mused, blinking slowly up at the ceiling.

"I have been asking myself that self-same thing," Frances agreed. Indeed, she had come to the conclusion that the only way to endure it was to take each day as it came. For tomorrow would offer some indication of how the rest of the month would go.

Emmeline cuddled into her sister. "May I sleep here tonight?"

"Of course, Sweet Sister." Frances held her close and tried to ignore the grip of envy that settled in her chest as, a few minutes later, she heard Emmeline's soft snores.

The beautiful are lucky, they sleep well, they marry well, and they are destined for happiness... but what of the rest of us?

"Goodnight, Emmy," she whispered, knowing sleep was still a long way off for her.

As fate would have it, Frances did not get to investigate the

Duke's promised new beginning the following day, for he had taken to his bedchamber with an unspecified "malady." Of course, much of the household could guess the cause. Too much wine could leave a legacy that lasted a day or two, especially in a person who was no longer in the prime of youth.

As such, Frances had spent the day at her leisure, wandering the grounds with her bulldogs and generally keeping out of the way of her mother and father, in case they decided to chide her anyway. She adored her parents but, at five-and-twenty, she preferred to avoid the tellings-off that made her feel as though she were a young girl again.

The day had stretched into evening, as days were wont to do, and there was still no sign of the Duke when they dined that night. Lord Croxley could not have been more apologetic, but Frances had sensed some relief in the fellow's regret. Still, there had been no respite from her sleeplessness when she had retired to her bedchamber, meaning she was not in the cheeriest of moods when she ventured out into the gardens the next morning.

"Do you think yourself clever?" She glared up at the swollen rainclouds that had just begun to spit, though they had waited until she was far enough from the Manor before rolling in.

The spattering droplets appeared to bulge within half a second, falling faster and more furiously, splashing against the stretching canopy of the woodland trees. Rain upon leaves was one of her favorite sounds, and she had hoped that the cool water might stir her dulled senses a touch, but she could not gain her usual enjoyment, feeling as tired as

she did.

“Frances, are you here?” Emmeline’s voice called out unexpectedly.

“I am!” Frances shouted back, peering between the thick trunks of the oaks and elders to try and spot her sister. The rain dripped down into her eyes and, when she rubbed them clear of the water, she discovered four figures hurrying toward her. Eris and Piglet, who had been walking with Frances, immediately raced to meet the newcomers, paying special attention to the Duke. He reached down to give them a vigorous scratch, though the movement made him look rather green for a moment.

Emmeline ducked under the shelter of a wide bough, tugging Frances beneath it. “Lord Croxley was curious to see the forest, but we did not account for the prospect of rain.” She gestured to the brothers and Cariad, who was acting as chaperone. “I told them you are the finest guide we have, so we thought to find you.”

“You must not overstate my ability,” Frances replied shyly, casting a discreet look at the Duke. Was he the same? Was he changed? It was hard to decipher, especially as he appeared so woefully unwell.

Lord Croxley stepped underneath the bough, smiling fondly at Emmeline. “She spoke very highly of you, Lady Frances, and I have faith in her praise.” He peered up at the downpour. “I do believe this is simply a summer shower. If we wait a few minutes, it will cease, and we will be able to continue with our exploration of the grounds. That is, if you do not object, Lady Frances? I am suddenly aware that we might be imposing upon your solitude.”

“Not in the slightest, Lord Croxley,” Frances replied, for she did not mind wandering with company, if Emmeline was part of said company. “You should have informed me of your wishes last night, and I would have planned a more thorough trail for us to follow. I am not so good at improvising.”

Lord Croxley nodded sympathetically. “I only had the thought this morning and was told that you had already ventured away from the Manor. Alas, it was my suggestion to find you. I hope neither of you ladies will catch a chill due to my enthusiasm for these forests.”

“We are made of hardier stuff than that, Lord Croxley,” Frances

promised, warming to the fellow.

He beamed broadly, barely taking his eyes off Emmeline. "I do not doubt that, Lady Frances. I should not admit it, but I have found it difficult to keep pace with Lady Emmeline and her chaperone. You must be used to these hills and strenuous terrains in a way that we are not, coming from the endless flat of Norfolk."

"Your legs will soon adapt, Lord Croxley." Frances admired any man who showed humility and could concede a weakness, especially if he did so with a smile upon his face.

I do not yet trust you with my sister's happiness, but you are winning me over. Then again, I doubt there is anyone upon this Earth who is worthy of her.

The quintet huddled beneath the oak bough as the summer shower continued to patter down upon the forest. The droplets, when they found the bare skin at the back of Frances' neck, or fell upon her forearm, were warm. She would have preferred to enjoy the comforting sound of the rain on the glass roof of the Orangery, but she supposed this was not entirely unwelcome.

Before long, the rain eased and the clouds rolled away on a breath of balmy wind, unveiling patches of clear blue that would eventually paint the entire sky.

"Hurrah! I thought we might be trapped here until the gong rang for dinner." Lord Croxley, chipper and amenable, clapped his hands together in excitement.

His brother, however, seemed to be getting greener by the second. "Might we walk, now? Otherwise, there is little use in us remaining in this blasted woodland."

"Do you detest the countryside so vehemently?" Frances eyed him.

He mustered a thin smile. "With a roiling stomach, I do. I desire fresh air, and these trees are most oppressive."

"There is a beautiful spot not far from here, where you may fill your lungs at your leisure and astound your eyes with a glorious view," Frances told him, curious about the tone of his voice. She could tell he

was trying not to be curt, but illness made a crosspatch out of even the most gentle-tempered person.

He nodded his head. "Then take us there instead of speaking of it, or are we to imagine the scenery?"

"I doubt you would have the creativity, Your Grace." She could not resist a tiny jab at his expense, nor did he retort, which seemed to mean progress.

Venturing away from the protective oak, the quintet followed a worn trail through the woodland. In truth, it *was* somewhat oppressive, for the rain had turned the air humid, so every breath became more difficult to take. Frances likened it to trying to suck a breath through a small tube, filled with wool. Nevertheless, they would soon be out in the open again and, in the meantime, she was determined to appreciate the earthy scent of soil and moss, mingling with the sweet aroma of damp wood and fragrant wildflowers.

Still, it surprised her when the group splintered slightly upon the trail, separating into two pairs, with Cariad bringing up the rear by herself, raising her hands in alarm every time the bulldogs appeared out of the undergrowth. Frances had expected the Duke to be the one lagging behind. Instead, he drew level with her, walking swiftly though he was clearly suffering.

"Do you wander in these woods as often as everyone claims?" he asked, folding his arms behind his back.

Frances arched an eyebrow. "That depends on what you have heard, Your Grace."

"Your sister said you walk here every morning, afternoon, and evening, if other responsibilities do not distract you. I find it hard to believe that you are permitted such freedom, or do you wander with your chaperone?"

Frances chuckled. "My mother and father have given up trying to rein in my peculiarities, Your Grace. They have accepted the fact that my dogs are my chaperones. Thus far, it has served me well." She paused. "And yes, I walk here as often as I may. What else is a spinster of five-and-twenty to do? I am merely preparing for my stretching years of seclusion."

“You have never desired to marry?” His tone shifted to one of genuine intrigue.

She shrugged. “As much as any young lady, though ‘desired’ is a rather strong word. ‘Expected’ might be better placed.” Stooping to pick up a fallen stick, she threw it into the underbrush and laughed as the two bulldogs charged after it. “I assure you, those expectations were soundly dashed. If you have spent any time in Society, you must know how cruel they can be toward those who are... different.”

“There must be someone who will marry you,” he remarked, making her roll her eyes.

“You must pardon my bluntness, Your Grace, but why does everyone feel the urge to say that to me? I do not want “someone,” for in that context it means, “anyone.” I may have been overlooked time and again, but I am not desperate,” she replied, more tersely than she had anticipated. It seemed, despite her protestations to the contrary, her spinsterhood was still a source of insecurity.

To her surprise, he laughed. “Forgive me, but I am still growing used to your way of speaking. It is so assured and frank that I might be speaking with one of my friends at a gentlemen’s club.”

“I take that as the highest of compliments, Your Grace.” Her expression softened, and the irritation of her insecurity calmed, as if someone had swept ointment across a nettle sting.

He nodded. “You should. It is... refreshing.”

“Careful, Your Grace. I am destined to be an eternal spinster; you should not make the mistake of falling for my strange charms.” It was intended in jest, but one look at the Duke’s face told Frances that she had crossed an unseen line.

His eyes darkened. “At thirty years of age, I have never fallen for any woman’s charms, nor do I mean to. You might be unusual, but you are not *that* unusual.” He took the stick out of Piglet’s mouth as the white bulldog sat down on the grass ahead of him. “Do not flatter yourself.”

“I never do,” she shot back, watching as he threw the stick and Piglet barreled after it. “For someone who claims to love teasing so much, you often fail to see the jests of others. Do you think I have looked in

the mirror and pictured myself as a Duchess? If you do, *that* might be the most humorous jest you have made since your arrival.”

Evidently, something had occurred in his life to make him so passionately averse to marriage. A broken betrothal, perhaps? A failed courtship? Whatever the reason, his reaction was unnecessarily intense, piquing Frances’ curiosity.

He turned his gaze toward her, as if studying a curio in a museum. “I am sorry... I do not believe we have been introduced. Perhaps, if I were better acquainted with you, I would learn when you are teasing and when you are serious.”

“Oh, I am rarely serious,” she replied, making a return study of his handsome face.

At closer quarters, he was far less frightening to behold. His dark eyebrows were flecked with some lighter strands of hair, there were a few faint freckles upon his high cheeks, and a small, silvery scar marked the corner of his right eye, like an extension of his enviably thick, black lashes. His lips remained stiff when he spoke, as though the act made him uncomfortable, and the apple in his throat bobbed above the edge of his collar and cravat, indicating that she made him nervous.

“I am Lady Frances Baxter, eldest daughter to the Earl of Fernside,” she added, humoring his attempt to ease the tension between them. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance at this rather odd, extremely ill-attended ball. Why, there is not even an orchestra or anyone dancing, so you must not ask me to dance the next set.”

The Duke smiled. “I am Andrew Jones, the Duke of Reeves. Indeed, I am appalled by the attendance and the lack of refreshments, though the decorations are becoming more pleasing to my eye.” He gestured around him. “One has to wonder how they managed to crowd so many trees into such a small Manor. Tell me, do you think they are real, or have they been painted?”

“It is hard to say,” Frances replied, tapping her knuckles upon the nearest trunk. “They feel rather real but bringing an entire forest indoors has surely impoverished the family. At least they will have a story to tell when they are selling off their daughters and sons to the highest bidders, to restore their fortune.”

The Duke's eyes shone with amusement. "You really are a strange being, Lady Frances, but the strangeness becomes more interesting with every moment I spend in your company. Truth be told, I am on edge, for I do not know what you will say or do next."

"But you have only spent a matter of minutes in my company, Your Grace." She flashed a wink and, deciding to shock him, she wrapped her hand around his wrist and set off at a run. Waiting for him to wrench his arm away, she smiled when he did not. Instead, he ran with her, the two of them racing up the sloping incline toward the peak of the hill ahead.

Somewhere behind, Frances heard Cariad yell, "Lady Frances! Do you want me to get dismissed? Come back here!"

Apologies, Cariad. I cannot behave today.

Tearing up the side of the hill, she did not slow until she reached the top, cresting the rise until the raw, natural beauty of the countryside revealed itself with vivid confidence. The clouds, still drifting across the sun, made the world appear to ripple, passing through a unique palette of green. No two fields or valleys or stretches of woodland were the same shade, but every single one took Frances' breath away.

She drew in a deep breath, relishing the caress of the warm wind against her exertion-flushed cheeks. Indeed, she was so invested in the landscape that she did not realize she was still holding onto the Duke's wrist.

"You are gripping me as though you are terrified, yet your expression is one of pure peace," he said, gently removing her hand and placing it upon the wider part of his forearm instead. A chivalrous gesture that no man had offered her before.

She stared at her hand upon his sleeve, dumbfounded. "I hope you do not bruise, Your Grace," she mumbled, completely agog. Had someone told her, two days ago, that this coarse, arrogant, rude gentleman would be the first to offer her his arm, she would have had to clutch her sides from laughing too hard.

"If I do, it will be worth it," he replied. "I feel much improved after that unexpected race."

She blinked, trying to gather her faculties. “They do say that clean, fresh air is the perfect remedy for many an ailment, Your Grace. Many a morning when I have imbibed too freely the night before, nothing has fixed me so quickly as a brisk walk to this very spot.”

“Ah, so my secret was revealed?” He sighed. “Who told you? Was it my brother? Please, do not use it as ammunition, for I would hate to ruin this moment, or this new introduction.”

She gave him a light nudge in the side, which seemed to startle him. “It was obvious, Your Grace. We have all suffered such a malady, so I shall be kind today. Let us say you had a complaint of the humors, in more ways than one.”

“Yes... let us say that,” he murmured, and as she peered up to observe his expression, she froze. His eyes were fixed upon her, his brow furrowed, his lips parted slightly as if he was holding his breath. Cautiously, his free hand covered the one she had resting upon his forearm, pushing the air from her lungs in turn.

The world around them slowed, the rush of the wind seemingly trying to knock them closer together, as they stared at one another. His face reflected her confusion and discomfort, yet neither of them looked away. Indeed, it was as if they really were seeing each other for the first time.

“Frances!” Emmeline’s voice pierced the stillness, prompting the pair to jolt apart.

Emmeline, Lord Croxley, and Cariad appeared over the brow of the hill, the latter looking very displeased. Although, as her gaze met Frances’, a flicker of astonishment crossed her face, softening her annoyance to something akin to wonder. In that moment, Frances felt, more than ever, that she had just been caught doing something very wrong.

With a few days to go before the belated betrothal party, coming just a fortnight before the wedding itself, nothing much was required of the Jones brothers, or the two young ladies of the Manor. As such, they naturally found themselves gathering together more and more, mainly for the sake of allowing Lady Emmeline and Peter to grow closer.

At least, that was what Andrew had convinced himself was the truth.

“You have no shame, do you?” he remarked, on a bright, slightly cooler summer afternoon, a week after he had first arrived at Fernside Manor.

Lady Frances, sitting astride her horse, to his left, cast him a challenging look. “That should not be such a terrible shock to you, Your Grace. Have you come to know nothing of me in this past week?”

“The more I learn of you, the less I feel I know.” He smirked, though it astounded him to see a young lady of nobility, sitting in the saddle as if she were a gentleman... her legs to either side instead of daintily placed to one side, as Lady Emmeline was doing.

Lady Frances shrugged. “It is far more comfortable to ride in this manner. If you do not care for it, please do inform me, so I can ensure that I am always racing ahead of you.” She paused and adopted the irreverent grin he had come to admire. “Undoubtedly, you will say that I gave you a slower horse, or the beast was not in the right temperament, or something of that ilk, but we will know the truth.”

“And what might that be?”

She reached forward to pat the horse's neck. “That I am the better rider.”

“Are you suggesting a contest, Lady Frances?” Andrew sat higher in his saddle, knowing he could easily beat her in a race. He had been riding horses for as long as he could remember, and the stablemaster at Reeves Hall had always complimented his skill and speed. Indeed, he had won many a race before, when others had challenged him.

A thrill palpably moved through her. “I do believe I am.”

“What are you saying?” Peter walked his horse forward, wearing an expression of concern. “Did I hear what I think I just heard? Surely not, for you would not be unfeeling enough to challenge a young lady to a race.”

Lady Emmeline joined the gathered group, looking less comfortable atop her horse. “Is something the matter, Peter? You look terribly stern.”

Within a matter of days, Lady Emmeline had taken to calling her betrothed by his given name. It continued to jar Andrew slightly, though there was a twinge of something else whenever he heard the endearment—an envy of sorts, for no one used his given name. Even Peter preferred to call him “Brother,” and he could not recall either of their parents ever summoning him with an “Andrew!”

“My brother is playing the trickster again,” Peter replied, swiftly hiding the disapproval upon his face. Undoubtedly, the fellow thought that his intervention would prevent the race from happening.

Lady Emmeline frowned. “Oh? Whatever do you mean?”

“We are going to race, Sister,” Lady Frances insisted. “He challenged and I accepted. Now, who will be the adjudicator, so there can be no sour losers when the race is done?”

Lady Emmeline blanched and looked like she might slip from the saddle. Spotting the waver, Peter's hand shot out to right her, bringing his horse flush to the side of hers.

“Are you well, Emmeline?” he asked, in a voice so sweet it made Andrew’s stomach turn. Or, perhaps, it was the soft way he spoke her name, so soft and intimate that Andrew felt he was observing something he should not be.

I knew the day would come when I would lose him. I have been preparing for the moment I am no longer his protector, for he will be the protector. Hers.

A lump formed in Andrew’s throat as he pictured the cavernous hallways of Reeves Hall. They were already eerie and empty with just the two brothers in residence, and the handful of servants in their employ. What would it be like when he returned there, while Peter journeyed to Croxley Manor with his new wife, where they would create a family of their own? One that Andrew would not be part of. Not in the same way.

“You ought to stop this nonsense, Sister,” Lady Emmeline urged, with a trembling voice. “Someone will get hurt.”

Lady Frances leveled her gaze at Andrew. “Do you doubt my ability, Sister? You have seen me race a thousand times, and I have never fallen from the saddle. Or is it the Duke’s welfare you are concerned about?”

Ah yes, but pride comes before a fall— Andrew bit back the retort.

“I might have seen you race countless times, Sister, but I am terrified each time!” Lady Emmeline explained, holding tight to Peter’s hand, as if taking courage from him. “Please, do not do this. Let us all ride at a leisurely pace down that trail you showed me last summer.”

Irreverence shone in Lady Frances’ striking, dark eyes. “You heard my sister, Your Grace. We shall race the northern trail. Indeed, it is rather fitting, for it concludes at the top of a hill with a cairn upon it—an ideal finishing line. Although, you will see me waiting there long before you conclude your race.”

“You are very certain of yourself,” Andrew said, knowing he ought to heed Lady Emmeline’s request and refuse the challenge. The trouble was, he wanted to see Lady Frances ride as wildly and as swiftly as she dared. The more he spoke with her, and spent time in her company, the more curious he became about her limitations and

shortcomings. Thus far, she did not seem to have any.

He recalled a conversation he had with Peter two nights ago, both of them somewhat inebriated after too much fine brandy, plied upon them by Lord Fernside.

"I cannot fathom her, Brother," Andrew had whispered, as if Lady Frances might be listening, though she had retired to her chambers. "What sort of... creature is she? Why, she is Artemis and Athena combined!"

Peter had stifled a snort. "Not Aphrodite?"

"I could not say, for though I have indulged in a considerable share of beautiful, exquisite young ladies—the kind of ladies most gentlemen would sell their soul to be near—none have inspired me to seek their company again," Andrew had explained, slurring his words. "But Lady Frances... she has bewitched me. I *like* being in her presence, for I cannot predict her as I can predict ordinary ladies. Mercy, I look forward to it!"

Peter had raised an eyebrow. "You *like* her?"

"Do not twist my words, Brother," Andrew had chided mildly. "I do not like her in that respect. I like the excitement she brings to any pursuit. I have not been bored a single day since coming here. I am even beginning to enjoy walking through the woodland, and you know I usually find such things tedious."

Peter had nodded sagely. "She is an odd sort, and I daresay she has some Dionysus in her veins, for she has matched us brandy for brandy and looked as fresh and clear of mind as one who had not imbibed at all."

"Precisely! There is witchery afoot; I am certain of it," Andrew had agreed vehemently. "She shoots better than any gentleman I have hunted with, she continuously triumphs over everyone at cards, she drinks as well as any man, she laughs brazenly and freely without any regard for being demure. She has trained two powerful bulldogs with her own hands, she walks wherever and whenever she pleases, unchaperoned; she is astonishingly well read, and she has a quicker wit than Lord bloody Byron! Her tongue is equally as coarse, too."

He remembered regaling Peter with the story of the watercress soup, and how Lady Frances had, without so much as a blush, alluded to her bosom. Peter had, naturally, been horrified, for the sister he adored represented everything sweet and innocent and decorous. The exact opposite of the mind-boggling Lady Frances.

“Did you hear me, Your Grace?” Lady Frances’ voice brought Andrew’s attention back to the matter at hand.

“Pardon?”

“I said I am not certain of myself, but I *am* certain of my twenty years of riding practice, and the knowledge I possess of this terrain,” she said, goading him. “So, what do you say we begin, instead of dallying?”

Lady Emmeline tried to take hold of her sister’s reins. “Do not, Franny. I beg of you.”

In that one plea, Lady Frances’ entire demeanor shifted. It was similar to the transformation Andrew had witnessed when she played with her bulldogs. All of the bravado and confidence vanished, replaced with a soft, endearing warmth that made her doubly intriguing.

“I am embarrassing you again,” she said quietly, taking hold of her sister’s hand. “Forgive me, Emmy. I allowed myself to be carried away by the thrill of the chase. Of course, if it makes you uncomfortable, I will not race.”

But I would see you run wild, Lady Frances... I must see if there is something I can better you at.

Andrew caught Lady Frances’ eye. “Three... Two...” he said with intent, wondering if the pull of her sister was stronger than the pull of her desire to win against him, “One... hi-yah!”

Tapping his heels into the side of the mount he had borrowed, the sleek, chestnut gelding displayed a dramatic rear before bolting forward. A few seconds later, man and beast were building speed, tearing along the open expanse of grassland to the starting line of the trees in the near distance.

With the wind sweeping past his ears, the thud of hooves pounding up

like a war drum, and his blood rushing to a thunderous clamor, he did not hear the shout go up behind him. If he had, he might have had the sense to stop. Instead, the cry of, "Stop! It is not safe that way!" was caught in the breeze, whipping away long before it could reach him.

Bending low until her back ached, her thighs burned, and her teeth creaked from being clenched too hard, Frances urged her trusty stallion, Khan, through the tangled undergrowth. The beast did not miss a step, leaping over felled logs and clearing hidden ditches and rabbit holes without pause.

All the while, Frances' head whipped this way and that, her eyes scouring the dense forest for any sign of the Duke. The snaking trail that slithered through these trees had been reclaimed by the woodland long ago—little more than a faint line, overgrown with twisting roots, spiny shrubs, flourishing weeds, and a thick blanket of moss and mulch.

If he is injured, if he has tumbled from the saddle or been thrown, if he has been knocked backward by a bough, I will never forgive myself.

Tears streamed down her cheeks, conjured by the whipping wind that lashed at her eyes. She made no move to wipe them away, though they blurred her vision. There was no time to do anything but blink, for if she missed even the faintest glimpse of the Duke, and he was not conscious... or alive, it would be a long while before someone else found him.

“Your Grace!” she shouted, charging as fast as she could. “Your Grace, where are you? Your Grace!”

Shaking her head, she cursed herself for antagonizing him. If she had refused in the first place, as a polite lady ought to, he would not have taken off in such a rash manner. He would not have felt the need to prove that he was the better rider.

I was the arrogant one. I should have held my tongue for once. For Emmy. Goodness, if anything has befallen the Duke, it will not only be him who suffers.

She swallowed thickly, wishing, not for the first time, that she had her sister's modest sensibilities. If she had been born in a different body, with a different face, would she have been more palatable to Society? Would it have changed the woman she had become? It had been a lengthy road to find peace in herself, and the way she was, but she was well aware that it could sometimes lead her to overcompensate.

I had nothing to prove! I did not need to show I was the better rider. Maybe, I am not. What is the matter with me? Why have I allowed him to get into my head like this?

"Your Grace! Please, Your Grace! Where are you?" she hollered, squinting between the regimented trunks to the shadows of the deeper woodland. Above the pummel of the wind, she listened for any unusual noises: birds erupting into the sky, the snap of twigs as rabbits scattered away from danger, the thud of a second horse. But the forest lay deathly silent, aside from the beat of Khan's hooves and the hammer of her own heart.

With no other choice, she continued to follow the barely visible trail, praying the Duke had done the same thing. And yet, a more insistent part of her hoped he had diverged from the path, for this trail did not end anywhere good. That was part of the reason it was rarely used, for there had been too many accidents over the years.

Just then, she spied the sleek form of the chestnut gelding, flashing between the narrow gaps of the oaks and elders and hazels. Thinking quickly, she gave a light pull on Khan's reins, turning him to the right. He did not hesitate to obey, for Frances had raised him from a colt, his watchful brown eyes noting any tricky debris before he came to it. The stallion sailed easily over an entire black elder that had crashed to the ground, likely during a bygone storm, and galloped on toward the chestnut gelding. Like he knew the purpose of this chase.

"Your Grace!" Frances surged back onto the vague trail, a few paces behind the gelding. Her eyes widened as she looked ahead, past the broad shoulders of the Duke. She knew this part of the trail all too well, and they were rapidly running out of ground.

The Duke glanced back, grinning. “You will not win this, Lady Frances! I apologize in advance, but I may gloat a bit.” He turned around again, visibly squeezing his athletic thighs harder, to urge the gelding on as fast as it could go.

“Your Grace, you must listen!” Frances yelled, though she did not have to squeeze her thighs or tap her heels to get Khan to gallop faster. He understood the peril his stablemate was barreling toward.

“I am afraid I cannot hear you!” the Duke shouted back, laughing gleefully.

Blast you, Your Grace! Listen to me!

Digging deep, she bent almost flat against Khan’s rippling back, and let the stallion do the hard work. Within fifteen seconds, Khan drew level with the gelding, giving Frances her last opportunity to save the stubborn Duke. If she did not act now, and act boldly, a terrible fate awaited him.

She slipped her foot out of the right stirrup and gingerly set it upon the saddle, before sliding her other foot out. Using all the strength left in her right leg, she pushed upward, leaping toward the gelding. The very moment she had vacated the saddle, Khan skidded to a sharp stop, his fearful whinny cutting through the forest.

“What are you—” the Duke barked his displeasure as Frances landed awkwardly behind him, clawing at his wide shoulders to prevent herself from falling to the ground. At the speed they were going, she would surely have broken a leg, if not something worse.

She slotted her legs to either side of the horse and wrapped one arm around Andrew’s waist, for purchase, while her other hand snatched at the reins. Seizing hold of them, she tugged violently to the left, prompting the gelding to veer away from the trail.

“Are you quite mad?” the Duke bellowed, fighting for control of the reins.

Frances struggled to see over the Duke’s immense breadth as she tugged on the reins a second time, turning the gelding all the way around. That done, she put two fingers under tongue and whistled so loudly it scared a flock of rooks from their roosts, the ominous, cawing

birds taking to the skies.

Please work, please work! She had only trained Khan, but she had used the stablemaster's techniques to do so. She just hoped the gelding had been trained in the same way and would heed the sound of that whistle.

To her abject relief, the gelding came to an abrupt standstill that very nearly threw both riders from the saddle. Frances gripped the Duke tighter, both of her arms clenching around his firm abdomen as the horse reared in alarm. Fortunately, the Duke did seem to be a seasoned rider, managing to stay in the saddle with a grip of his thighs, keeping them both from tumbling downward.

Stilted silence blanketed the forest as the gelding settled, though it pawed the undergrowth in confusion. When it saw Khan walking toward them, it ceased its uneasy stomping, content to snatch up clumps of grass and weeds instead. If only the Duke could have been so easily placated.

“What in Heaven’s name were you thinking?” He whirled around, his eyes flaring with fury. “You could have killed me! No, you could have killed us both!”

Frances met his fiery gaze with a calm evenness. “You would have died if you had continued racing onward, Your Grace.” Heart pounding, breath shallow, limbs shaking, she slid down from the saddle and landed on the ground. “Come with me for a moment.”

“I thought you were strange, Lady Frances, but I did not think you were insane!” He jumped down, stalking after her up the trail, which thinned into nothing a short distance from where the horses grazed. “Are you such an atrocious loser that you had to attempt to sabotage me? I ought to send for constables after that ridiculous, dangerous performance!”

Frances ignored him, treading more carefully as she traversed the spongy undergrowth, peering ahead for the threat she knew to be nearby. It required even fewer steps than she had anticipated, making her feel sick to her stomach. If she had not leaped for the gelding at the very second she did, there would not be a wedding at all, but a funeral.

“Stop!” She put up her hand and looked at the Duke.

He halted. “What is the meaning of this madness, Lady Frances?”

She walked back to him and took his hand, guiding him nine paces forward—no more, no less. “*That* is the meaning of this madness, Your Grace.” She gestured downward, to where the ground suddenly fell away. A concealed stone shelf ringed the entrance to a plummeting drop. There was a pool at the very bottom, according to local lore, but anyone who stumbled into that gaping mouth would be dead when they hit the water. At that height, the pool might as well have been solid rock.

The Duke staggered back. “Oh my goodness!” He tripped on a branch and landed on his backside, though he made no effort to stand again. “My word, that would not have... ended well.”

“No, it would not.” Trembling as the fear abandoned her body, she went to him and sat beside him, though the damp mulch soaked through the rear of her riding habit.

He ran a nervous hand through his hair. “I did not know.”

“I am aware, Your Grace. That is why I shouted for you to stop when you hared away. I guessed you had not heard me, so I chased after you.” She gulped, feeling desperately unwell. “I am glad I found you in time, though I apologize for startling you. There was not a moment to spare for explanation.”

His dark-blue eyes, precisely the color she imagined that deadly pool to be, peered at her in regret. “You... saved me. You put yourself in harm’s way to stop me from making a fatal mistake.”

“A broken limb is nothing compared to never waking up again, Your Grace,” she replied somberly. “I must admit, you know how to ride swiftly. If you had not had such expert horsemanship, you might have saved me the strain of trying to reach you before you... well, I suppose it does not need saying.”

He closed his eyes and visibly shuddered. “Thank you, Lady Frances.”

“Frances, please,” she insisted.

His eyes opened, flashing with surprise. "I do not think that would appropriate."

"And I do not think honorifics are necessary between two people who have almost died together," she replied, nudging his arm. "Though, I will continue to refer to you as 'Your Grace,' if you wish me to. I might leap from moving horses, but I am not so outlandish that I would speak to you casually without your permission."

He managed a faint smile. "Then... I suppose you should call me—" He hesitated, as if trying to figure out what she *should* call him. "I suppose 'Andrew' would suffice."

"Andrew." She rather liked the way it pursed her lips like blowing a kiss. "Would you care to remain here a while longer, or are you able to ride again?"

He furrowed his brow. "Might we walk and lead the horses?"

"Of course," she agreed, for she did not know if her still-shaking legs would be of any use upon Khan's back. Not that he required much in the way of instruction.

Slowly, the anxious pair got to their feet, and, for the second time, Andrew offered Frances his arm. She took it gratefully, leaning into him more than was probably proper, as they returned to the horses. Walking in the middle of the two beasts, they took hold of the respective reins, and set off along the vague trail, heading back to safety.

"Thank you, Frances. Did I say that already?" Andrew murmured: his eyes somewhat wild.

She chuckled. "You did, Andrew, but I do not mind a second show of thanks."

"I suppose I must also concede defeat," he said, covering her hand with his. "You are an astonishing rider. Aside from once, at a circus, I have never seen anyone leap from one saddle to another."

Frances glanced up at him conspiratorially. "Nor have I."

“Pardon?” His face blanched.

“I did not even know if it would work,” she admitted. “But let us not think of that, for we are both alive, with all of our limbs intact. I daresay the Heavens were watching over us today.”

He swallowed loudly. “I am beginning to believe the Egyptians were mistaken, for you are very lucky indeed.”

Walking on, Frances stole one look back at the hidden pit, swathed in the forest’s densest shadow. It chilled her to think how close they had both come to riding straight over the edge, but it was not luck that had saved them, it was the peculiarity that ostracized her from Society. Had she been anyone else, born in any other body, with any other mind, Andrew would not be standing at her side.

Are you here to test me, Andrew?

She discreetly observed him, thinking of how tightly she had clung to him upon the back of the gelding. She had not hesitated to wrap her arm around him, just as she had not hesitated to take his hand and lead him to the precipice of the hidden hole. Now, however, she felt an odd tingle prickling her skin, like the onset of a fever.

“It might be best if we do not mention this to the others,” she said quietly. “My mother and father, dear to me as they are, would be more appalled by my antics than the prospect of you falling down that hole.”

His hand tightened around hers. “Are you certain, Frances?”

The sound of her name from his lips ignited the tingle to a sweeping, fiery rush that burned in her cheeks. “I am.”

“Very well, though I do not mind lauding your daring rescue.” He smiled, thawing away any frosty edges that had remained between them. There was no longer anything frightening to be found in his expression or his demeanor. How could there be, for nothing exposed a man’s vulnerability as swiftly as facing death?

She blushed more ferociously. “You are too kind, but that will not be necessary. I have learned a valuable lesson today.”

“Oh?”

“I should not congratulate myself too often. Had I shown more humility, you might not have raced away like that,” she replied, touching the back of her free hand to her cheeks, to try and cool them. “I am sorry, Andrew.”

He shook his head. “You have no reason to apologize. My pride almost caused my fall. That was no fault of yours.”

“If you say so.” She glanced down at her hand upon his forearm, wondering if she ought to remove it before she began to like it too much.

Oh, Andrew, I have the most awful feeling that you and I are stepping into far greater peril.

For if they did not have their annoyance and disdain for one another, what would replace it? The prospect terrified her more than any camouflaged pit, for at least she knew how that fall would end.

“**Y**ou promised you would behave yourself,” Peter grumbled

in a low voice, pulling Andrew to one side as they emerged from the stables. The sisters were still inside, feeding apples to their horses, though Andrew sensed that the two women would be having a similar discussion.

Andrew nodded. “I am aware of my promise, Brother, and I do not feel as though I have broken it. The race was supposed to be a friendly one.”

“Friendly?” Peter shook his head. “There is nothing friendly about challenging a young lady to ride in such a manner. True, Lady Frances may behave in a way that seems masculine, but she is not a man, she is not one of your club friends, and you would do well to remember that. You certainly should not have charged off alone. Anything could have happened to you in those woods.”

If only you knew— Andrew did not explain aloud, holding true to the other promise he had made, to Frances. At first, he had fervently wished he could celebrate her brave actions, but as they had made their way back to the stables, that feeling had transformed into one of relief that he could keep it a secret. He was a Duke, after all. What would people think of him, if they discovered that he had needed to be saved by a woman? No matter how strange she was, it would be a source of great embarrassment, particularly as he had put himself in that potentially fatal situation.

“What do you want me to say?” Annoyance bristled in Andrew’s chest. “Would you have me cry a public apology from the roof of the Manor? Will that satisfy you?”

Peter's eyes narrowed. "A simple, heartfelt apology would suffice."

"Maybe I would do just that, if I thought I had anything to apologize for," Andrew shot back stubbornly, unable to quell the rising humiliation that bubbled within him. He resented feeling vulnerable, and he was beginning to hate that he had shown weakness in front of someone who did not seem to possess any fear or weakness whatsoever. No matter what remarks he tossed Frances' way, she remained undaunted, and no matter what challenge he laid at her feet, she found a way to triumph over him.

An expression of sorrow crossed Peter's face. "Why must you be this way, Brother? Would it kill you to say that you are sorry, just once?"

"I fear it might," Andrew muttered, clasping a hand to his chest as a second wave of fear struck his veins, prompting his heart to pump like an exuberant set of bellows.

Would I really have plummeted down that slope? He swallowed uncomfortably: his throat intolerably tight.

After his father's passing, Andrew had devoted the ensuing years to living precisely as he pleased, existing for the pleasures of the world without bowing to the weight of purpose. But confronting Death itself, he had been surprised to find that very little had crossed his mind. He had not thought of the beautiful ladies who had offered company on lonely nights, nor the fortune that would see the dynasty through generations to come, nor the gambling halls, public houses, taverns, or music halls that he frequented. Instead, he had thought of Peter, their mother, and, most astonishingly of all, Frances.

The missed opportunities. The future I would not get to see. He shuddered, forcing his gratitude toward Frances to turn into irritation. Of course, he would have seen the hole before he fell into it. Of course, he would have stopped his horse in time. Of course, he would have emerged unscathed. Yet, now, she likely thought him a fool, and that she held the upper hand, because she had prevented him from finding out if he might have been able to save himself.

Indeed, it would have been you, Frances, who might have been terribly injured if I had not held fast to the gelding when it reared in fright! He smoothed a hand down the front of his waistcoat, remembering how tightly she had gripped onto him. So hard, in fact, that she had ripped

away a button. In the moment, he had not thought much of it, but now he had been given time to dwell... it had felt rather nice to be someone's protector again, however briefly. Maybe, that was why he was in such turmoil about her being the true savior.

"Did you not hear Lady Frances shouting that the trail was unsafe?" Peter folded his arms across his chest, clearly disappointed in his brother's lack of humility.

Andrew shrugged. "I heard no such thing."

"Why did she look so pale and frightened when you returned from the forest? *Did* something happen?" Peter pressed, his gaze flitting toward the stables, no doubt thinking of all the ways in which his brother might ruin his plans to wed the angelic Lady Emmeline.

Andrew huffed out a frustrated breath. "She *is* pale. I doubt she could become any paler, even if she tried. I have seen milk with more color," he mumbled sourly. "As for why she was frightened... perhaps, she is not as courageous as she would have everyone believe. Racing upon a stallion can be a stressful experience in the wrong hands. I imagine the speed of the beast alarmed her."

A prick of guilt nipped at his innards. Deep down, he knew it was unfair to make such remarks after the brazen bravery Frances had displayed in rescuing him, not to mention the exemplary horsemanship. *He* would not have dared to leap from one saddle to another, especially if he had not attempted such a thing before. Evidently, a change had occurred upon exiting the woodland, that forbade him from speaking favorably about the woman who had risked her own life for his.

I did not apologize to her, either. I could not even say that I was sorry when there was no one else around. His heart clenched, making him wonder what on Earth was wrong with him. Had his father broken him so completely that he could not show remorse and apology, even where it was merited? Apparently so.

Peter raised an eyebrow. "I do not imagine that to be true, Brother. Emmeline has spoken often of her sister's skill upon her stallion, and how she trained the creature by herself from when it was a colt. She is, by all accounts, quite the equestrian, nor did she seem afraid when she raced after you. Quite the opposite, in truth." He sighed.

“Something happened, did it not? Why will you not tell me?”

“Nothing happened!” Andrew barked, longing to clamber back into the gelding’s saddle so he could ride away to a place where he would not be interrogated. “Indeed, I doubt she looked frightened. That is simply the way she looks. All of her features are awkward, ill-suited, and overly large, and her blank, dark eyes are no exception. You likely mistook her usual, unfortunate expression for something it was not.”

Peter’s own, wide-eyed stare alerted Andrew, too late, to the reappearance of Frances and her sister. A low, disappointed tut sounded behind him, and though he knew he would have to look upon France’s face—the one he had just so soundly insulted—he did not dare to turn and see it any sooner than he had to.

“Please, do go on,” Frances said, a note of amusement in her voice. “I am always eager to hear about my most unfortunate attributes. It is such a thrill when I hear of something I have not heard before. Alas, you have only pointed out the features that countless others have done before you. Come, Your Grace, where is your sense of imagination? Spurn the small mole upon my temple, or the deep line that rather looks like there has been a garotte around my neck. Might I tempt you with the fact that one of my eyebrows is longer than the other, or that my ears have a tendency to stick out?”

Andrew inwardly cringed, for he had not meant for her to hear his tirade. Indeed, he did not mean half of what he had said. True, her features were not traditionally beautiful or petite in any way, but he had come to admire her appearance precisely *because* it was different. Her looks did not bore him as the ordinary beauty of other women did.

With a breath, he turned around, adopting an expression of nonchalance. “Who is to say I was speaking about you, Lady Frances?” It felt peculiar to address her so formally, after they had decided to forgo the honorifics with one another. “Are you so severe upon your appearance that you think any unfavorable remark must be at your expense?”

Frances frowned, and he could have sworn he saw a glimmer of hurt in her dark eyes, which were not blank at all. Cold in their guardedness, maybe, but he had seen them sparkle with amusement, burn with annoyance, flare with anger, and soften with adoration

when embracing her dogs.

The wounded glint vanished as she tilted her strong chin upward. “Not always, Your Grace, but, when aligned with context of your conversation about my raising Khan from when he was a colt, it is hard to believe you were *not* discussing my “awkward, ill-suited, overly large” features.”

“You make an excellent observation.” He maintained an air of calm candor. “However, I said nothing about the sum of those parts.”

Frances squinted at him. “Pray tell, what *do* you make of the sum of those parts?”

“I find your appearance... interesting.”

She nodded solemnly. “Interesting is better than grotesque, I suppose. Although, I find the word, in description, to be rather like saying something is “nice” or “adequate.” It is non-committal.”

“What would you have me commit to?” he retorted, folding his arms behind his back so he would have no cause to wring his hands in discomfort.

An irreverent smirk lifted one corner of her swollen lips. “Goodness me, nothing! You forget, Your Grace, I have heard so very much about you.” She paused for dramatic effect. “Nay, I must correct myself—I have *read* much about you. Thusly, I have concluded that getting you to commit to anything would require the same sorcery as squeezing blood from a stone.”

“I think luncheon will be served soon!” Lady Emmeline leaped into the conversation, clutching at her sister’s arm as if she meant to pull it away. “We should not tarry and upset the cook. She does so hate it when her dishes grow cold.”

Frances smiled. “Of course, Dear Thing.” Her gaze did not leave Andrew’s for a moment. “I have a ravenous appetite after all that riding. Truly, nothing will make one’s stomach growl quite like a daring feat.”

She will not say it, will she? Concern lodged a breath in Andrew’s throat.

“A daring feat, Lady Frances?” Peter furrowed his brow, obviously believing he might gain some information from the only other witness.

Frances plucked a stray leaf from the nest of her hair. “Oh yes, Lord Croxley. It has been a long while since I have galloped so hard and jumped Khan over fallen logs and wide ditches; I had forgotten what an excitement it could be. It would have been all the sweeter if I had been the heroine of the hour, but His Grace was already returning when I happened upon him. I suppose he realized he had gone astray.”

“So, there was no incident?” Peter seemed disappointed.

Frances chuckled. “Heavens, no. If there had been, you would be pleading with me to be quiet, for I would not be able to stop gloating and congratulating myself on my bravery.”

“Ah, I see.” Peter offered an apologetic look to his brother, but Andrew could not garner any satisfaction from it. All he could do was marvel in a bittersweet fashion at Frances glossing over the truth for his benefit, considering all he had just said about her “unfortunate” looks. It rather made him feel cowardly, when she deserved every plaudit for the blessed thing she had done that day.

Lady Emmeline released a relieved sigh. “Let us all go into the Manor. I do hope there will be time for us to wash and change before we dine.”

“Yes, I do find that the stench of horse, much as I adore Khan, rather diminishes one’s desire to eat,” Frances agreed with a grin. “Although, it does give me this terrible craving for carrots and apples, and a ludicrous impulse to... neigh.”

Lady Emmeline nudged her sister, laughing merrily. “You are so very silly, Sweet Sister.”

“Only for you, Dear Thing,” Frances replied, casting a pointed look at Andrew.

With any disagreement smoothed over, and hopefully forgotten, the foursome made their way back to the Manor at a leisurely pace. Peter and Lady Emmeline walked ahead, deep in a fevered discussion about the rare butterflies they both longed to see when they visited the

botanical gardens, while Frances hung back, and Andrew positioned himself somewhere between the two factions.

After the insults that had been hurled, Andrew did not expect Frances to join him in a pair. As such, he got quite the fright when she appeared at his left side, arms folded behind her back in a mocking echo of him.

“Frances, I—” he began, but she cut him off sharply.

“Do not mistake your perception of me with reality, Andrew. I wear a thick plating of armor about my person, that is true, but it is a craven act to fire poison arrows at such a close distance. Especially upon an ally, which is what I thought we had become.” Her dark gaze turned up at him, and he noticed that hint of injury had returned to their depths. “Truth be told, Andrew, I am not as impervious as I seem.”

He dipped his chin to his chest, unable to bear the heat of her disappointment. “You were not supposed to hear those things.”

“That is irrelevant,” she said with an eerie calm in her voice. “Indeed, it is worse that you did not mean for me to hear, for you are more likely to speak honestly when the target of your discussion is not nearby.”

His head snapped up. “You should not have eavesdropped.”

“I did not eavesdrop; I overheard. There is a subtle, but definite, difference between the two. And I daresay my punishment for that mistake has already been well executed,” she replied, smiling tightly. “Do you think anyone, man or woman, likes to hear such things said about them?”

Chastened, Andrew returned his chin to his chest. “I cannot be blamed for the way in which you have chosen to take my words. You are not privy to my thoughts, so you cannot know how they were intended.”

“As I once explained about your humor, the intention is decided by the audience. *I* get to decide how your words make me feel, not you.” She kept her chin tilted upward, but he no longer saw a haughtiness in her face. Instead, he saw her strength, for she must have endured a thousand comments every time she stepped out into Society. A thousand comments that he had added his foolish tally to.

I am sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry. He knew that was all he needed to say, as long as he said it with sincerity. If he were to halt and take hold of her hands, squeezing them gently as he gazed deep into her enchanting eyes, she would have no choice but to believe the gravity of his apology. Indeed, he wished there was a way that he *could* show her his thoughts, so she would know that he had not meant any of his injurious remarks and see just how grateful he was.

Yet, the words would not come. To him, “sorry” was akin to reciting the entirety of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* by heart. Impossible, unless one had dedicated decades to learning how.

Reaching a side door that led from the gardens into the Manor, Andrew jolted as Frances suddenly whirled around and pushed him back into the jamb. Ordinarily, a shove from someone like her would barely have moved him, but she had used the element of surprise.

He stared down at her as she pressed her finger into his chest. Not hard, but it could not have been mistaken for a gesture of tenderness.

“Be careful of your words and who you judge, Andrew,” she said with alarming softness. “You never know when you may need them to save your life.”

Throughout the rest of the day, Frances maintained a civility with Andrew. Indeed, she might have been overly courteous, but only to increase the unease that she could see upon his annoyingly handsome face. Evidently, no one had taught him manners, which was not as unusual as might have been expected among the *ton's* gentlemen. So, she had decided to undertake the tutelage herself.

Because I am a spinster, they think they can speak about me however they please, but unwanted does not mean unworthy. She let her anger flare as she wandered away from the Manor and into the sprawling woodland for her evening constitutional, accompanied by her beloved hounds.

“What do you think, pups?” she asked, picking up a stick to throw for them.

Eris sat politely, tilting her head to one side, as if thinking over the question. Piglet, on the other hand, was too invested in a rabbit that had darted into its burrow. His paws scraped determinedly at the soil and earth, ripping up roots and shrubs, while smudging his white coat with streaks of brown and gray.

“Piglet, leave the poor thing alone!” Frances instructed, and the bulldog backed off, coming to sit at Eris’ side. “I require your advice, and you are chasing defenseless creatures. Why, I am quite hurt.”

Piglet loped forward and sniffed at Frances’ shoes, before jumping up at her legs to gain her forgiveness.

Chuckling, she crouched and scratched between his ears, cradling his face and smothering him with kisses. “I simply cannot stay mad at

you, Dear Piglet. Indeed, at least you have the wherewithal to say you are sorry when you have done wrong.” She grinned as a thought popped into her head. “Although, I do not know what I would do if Andrew suddenly started jumping up at me, trying to lick my face in apology. It would be unseemly of me to scratch his head and lavish him with kisses, would it not?”

Piglet barked his agreement, prompting Eris to rush over to receive her share of the affection.

Once the dogs were satisfied that they had been adored and cherished enough, they set off down the southern trail. Swiping her stick at the bowing fronds of bracken and the heads of foul-scented foxgloves, she followed them at a gentle pace, already feeling much calmer about the day’s events. That was the wonder of her dogs—no matter how awful she felt, or what had befallen her, they were always there to cheer her up.

Between you two and my family, I need no one and nothing else. She sighed contentedly, weaving through a winding part of the path that cut through a dense spread of plane trees, horse chestnuts, and elder trees. She made sure to press her palm to the solitary, majestic yew that stood in a glade all its own: the “Guardian of the Forest,” as she had named it. Rumor had it that there used to be an old burial ground in that glade, dating back to before the Vikings invaded, which was why nothing grew in the wide circle of grass aside from the yew in the center.

“Sleep well, and do not awaken,” she whispered, as she always did, just in case it was true. There were enough unwanted guests due to arrive at the Manor for the betrothal ball without adding ghouls and ghosts to the invitation list.

Though, if you were not otherwise occupied with haunting this woodland, perhaps you might haunt Andrew into learning some manners and gratitude. She laughed at the thought, only to stifle a yelp as a branch cracked under Piglet’s foot—as loud as a pistol shot.

“Perhaps not,” she said hurriedly. “I am sorry to have asked.”

Continuing on at a swifter pace, eager to be away from the yew tree and whatever was buried below, a wash of sadness came over Frances. She had not allowed herself to think of what had occurred earlier that

day, nor how pleasant it had felt to be admired by Andrew in the immediate aftermath. His gratitude had felt sincere then, so what had happened? How could it have changed so dramatically, as soon as they left the shadows of the woodland?

Even if I were hideous, which I am not, I am still deserving of your apology. She shook her head in despair, her cheeks flushing as her thoughts returned to their moment upon the horse, when she had held onto him in a most improper manner. Though, she had liked it best when he had offered her his arm, and she had leaned into him for support.

Before long, she came to the boundary of the Fernside Estate: a high railing of rusty iron atop a base of stone that came up to her chest. Without hesitation, she picked up the bulldogs, one at a time, and put them on the lip of the stone wall. Rotund as they were, they slipped easily through the bars of the railing, waiting for her on the other side. A routine they were more than used to.

“Let us hope we do not startle a passing farmer, this time.” She chuckled at the dogs as she grasped the hem of her skirts and swiftly girded her loins, like the warriors and warrioresses of old. The folding and wrapping and tucking of the cumbersome fabric was second nature to her, by now, and within a minute she had created what looked like a peculiar pair of medieval breeches.

That done, she hoisted herself up onto the edge of the wall, before shimmying up one of the bars and clambering over the top of it, careful to avoid the fleur-de-lis barbs that tipped each bar. Repeating the same motions on the other side, she dropped down to the grass with ease and retrieved her beloved dogs, setting them loose once more.

Of course, she could have used the main gates, but there was always a guard posted there, and she did not want to have to explain to her mother and father why she desired to leave the Manor grounds. They did not understand that, sometimes, even the grandest estate could feel too small, nor why she so loved to stroll up the road and into the nearest villages to see how the people of her father’s Earldom were faring.

Unfastening the wrappings and tucks of her skirts as she walked, until her skirts flowed as they had done before, she smiled up at the

glorious performance that the sun was displaying across the celestial theater of the sky: cloud dancers painting streaks of vivid pinks, rich reds, hazy purple, and flaming orange across a canvas of dusky blue.

Indeed, she was so engrossed in the sunset that she did not notice the lopsided carriage until she had almost walked straight into the nose of a halted horse. Four of the beasts were attached to a luxurious landau carriage; the two folding hoods raised to conceal the passengers within.

“How odd,” Frances murmured, for it was very unusual to see such a carriage in the countryside. Such things were ordinarily reserved for the city, to put their passengers’ wealth on full parade.

Curious, she approached the nearest side door and knocked lightly upon the window. The pale, startled face of an older woman, perhaps fifty or so, appeared behind the pane.

“Are you in need of assistance?” Frances said, glancing left and right for any sight of the driver or the groom, who should have been standing in position at the rear of the carriage. At the very least, he should have been keeping guard over the woman within.

The passenger tentatively opened the door. “I am afraid one of the wheels has come loose from the carriage. The groom and driver have gone to the village to fetch help.” She paused. “They have been gone a terribly long time, and I have not the slightest notion of where I am.”

“Are you visiting someone?” Frances leaned up against the side of the landau, grateful she had restored her skirts to their usual style. This poor woman already seemed terrified, without having to contend with two intrigued dogs and a young lady baring her legs for all to see.

The older woman appeared hesitant to answer, her worried gaze fixed on the bulldogs who were trying to scramble up into the carriage. Promptly, Frances whistled for them to heel, and they retreated to either side of her legs, bringing a look of astonishment to the passenger’s face.

“My name is Lady Frances. I am the Earl of Fernside’s daughter—the Manor is not far from here, if you require respite until the driver and groom return.” She gestured down the road, though she could no longer see the section of railing she had climbed over. “You have no

need to fear me or my dogs. They will not bite, and nor will I.”

The ghost of a smile crept onto the older woman’s face, and a wheezy laugh escaped her lips. “Fate does work in mysterious ways,” she said, visibly relaxing. “I am Tabitha Jones, the Dowager Duchess of Reeves.”

“Of course, you are!” Frances pretended to smack her forehead. “Lord Croxley mentioned that you would be traveling to us this week. It is a pleasure to welcome you to the Chiltern Hills, though I am sorry they have not been quite so kind upon first introduction.”

If you had chosen a more suitable mode of transportation, the wheels would not have had trouble upon the uneven roads. She did not say so out loud, for there was no reason to rub salt into an open wound. Moreover, the poor woman had likely never visited this part of the country before—how could she have known that the landau would struggle?

The Dowager chuckled. “You are the eldest Fernside daughter, are you not?”

“Alas, I am,” Frances replied, flashing a wink. “Did my haggard appearance and my wrinkles and creases give me away?”

A sense of ease settled between the two women, as the Dowager’s ready laughter continued to ripple from her thin mouth. “How amusing you are, Lady Frances! And fear not, there are no wrinkles, creases, or haggardness to be found in your visage. I should know, for I am inundated.”

“Nonsense!” Frances retorted. “When you said you were the Dowager Duchess, I could not even begin to do the arithmetic in my head, for not a soul would believe you had a son of thirty. Are you quite certain he is yours, and not a foundling?”

It was a risky jest, but it served to know where the lines were drawn within the first period of meeting someone. Frances just hoped she had not overstepped, lest the Dowager’s disapproval trickle down to Emmeline.

Fortunately, the Dowager smiled, and her light-blue eyes held a sparkle of good humor. “You are too generous, Lady Frances!” She

waved a shy hand. "He is, most certainly, mine."

"I do see the resemblance, though you are far prettier," Frances quipped, offering a hand to the Dowager. "Might you care to walk with me to the Manor, Your Grace? It is not far, as I mentioned, and I would not have you wait here until midnight for the fellows who have abandoned you. While you are supping tea and satisfying any hunger you might have, I will instruct some of the men from the Manor to come and repair the wheel. Failing that, they shall have to drag it."

The Dowager accepted Frances' hand and stepped out of the landau, eyeing the bulldogs warily. "You are sure they will not bite, Lady Frances?"

"Quite sure, for they are great admirers of beautiful ladies. They would be more inclined to lavish you with their licking kisses until your face is raw, Your Grace." Frances tapped her hand against her thigh, and both dogs raised up on their hind legs, performing one of their many tricks in order to put the Dowager at further ease.

The older lady clapped her hands together. "How delightful!"

Frances twirled her forefinger and the dogs turned in a comical circle; their stocky builds not suited to performing the dainty tricks of cosseted breeds.

"I must say, they are more endearing than I first thought," the Dowager acceded. "Do they belong to your father?"

Why must everyone say that? Frances resisted the urge to roll her eyes, for the Dowager likely meant nothing by it.

"They are my loyal companions, Your Grace. Many are surprised when they hear that, but if you take but one look at me, you will understand why I would appear quite ridiculous with a pug or a Pomeranian." Frances smiled. "If I were a dog, I would assuredly be an English bulldog."

The Dowager shook her head. "You are too harsh on yourself, Lady Frances, though these hounds do become more charming, the more you look at them."

"As do I." Frances cackled, and, holding the Dowager's arm as a

gentleman might, she led the honored guest down the road toward the Manor.

Indeed, they were almost at the point in the road where Frances had clambered over the railing, when a remarkable sight appeared at that exact spot: a finely attired gentleman, fussing with the front of his shirt and waistcoat, which had obviously been ripped asunder by one of the fleur-de-lis barbs.

Frances' eyes widened in appreciation and astonishment as she caught a glimpse of sculpted, bare chest and a rippling abdomen of hardened muscle. Realizing that the fellow's mother was standing right beside her, she hurriedly averted her eyes, though she would not forget that wondrous vision anytime soon.

"What are you doing, my boy?" the Dowager gasped, her hand flying to her mouth.

Frances could not conceal a smile as she kept her eyes averted, for there was only one reason Andrew would be in that state, in that precise spot by the road: he had tried to follow her. Thinking privately of his carved physique, she was not sorry that he had.

But why would you try to come after me? That question was much harder to answer, prompting her smile to fade. To come after her, alone and unchaperoned, would have been more catastrophic than any torn shirt.

Unbidden, his earlier insults about her appearance invaded her mind, and a surprisingly saddening realization dawned. *No, I understand why. You do not even see me as a lady.* She swallowed, hating the swell of upset that bloomed in her chest. This was precisely why she had built up walls around her heart and did not dance or accept a gentlemen's offered arm, so she would not suffer such a blow and allow it to affect her. And she feared that if just one crack appeared in those fortifications, the entire thing would come crumbling down. Rubble that could never be rebuilt the same again.

O *f all the foolish things I have done, and all the untimely moments I*

could have chosen— Embarrassment was proving to be a regular sensation for Andrew since arriving at Fernside Manor. Prior to that, it had been an entirely alien feeling, rarely warming his cheeks or making his stomach lurch, and he wished he could return to those previous days of blissful ignorance.

“You were not expected until tomorrow, Mother,” he said as calmly as he could, while struggling to hold the two torn sides of his shirt and the lapels of his waistcoat across his exposed chest. The rush of mortified heat in his cheeks seemed to be spreading down his neck and onto that bared skin, and he wondered if Frances could see the pinkish hue.

His mother gaped at him. “And that is a reasonable excuse for your... state of undress?”

“Obviously, I did not anticipate that my garments would tear, Mother,” he replied sullenly, hating that such a humiliating moment was taking place in front of Frances. Especially as he had followed her in the hopes of making amends for his earlier transgression. How could she take him seriously after this?

To make matters worse, the two bulldogs were jumping up at his legs, making it harder to keep hold of his ripped attire.

Graciously, Frances put her fingers to her lips and whistled, drawing the dogs to heel. “I know you meant well, dear creatures,” she cooed, crouching to scratch their furry heads, “but you must not leap at His Grace when he is battling with his decency.”

His Grace? The sting of that was almost worse than the humiliation Andrew suffered. Although, he understood that Frances could not very well refer to him by his given name in front of his mother. The trouble was, after the insults he had uttered—regardless of whether or not he had meant a single word—he did not know if she would ever call him “Andrew” again.

“Why *did* they tear? What in Heaven’s name were you doing?” His mother shook her head, not in disappointment but in confusion.

Andrew sighed. “I lost my way in the woods and could not find the gate. I spotted the road and knew it would lead me back to the entrance of Fernside,” he explained, rather hurriedly. “In hindsight, I realize I should have followed the road from the other side of the wall, but... well, I did not. Now, I should like to return to the Manor before I am apprehended for such a public indiscretion.”

“You are fortunate you are not in London or Norfolk,” his mother agreed. “There would have been gossip for weeks about you, and you know I hate it when you are the subject of such idle chatter.”

Andrew swallowed and cast a discreet glance at Frances. She had never elaborated, but she had alluded to the fact that she knew of his continued presence in the scandal sheets. He prayed she would not make one of her usual jests, for his mother did not know the true extent of his reputation. As a woman who was practically a hermit within Reeves Hall, his mother knew little of what went on beyond the boundaries.

“Allow me, Your Grace.” To his surprise, Frances removed the light shawl that covered her shoulders and closed the gap between them. In a rather brazen move, she tied the shawl around his waist like a rudimentary belt, holding the sides of his upper garments together... and making sure to tug hard as she fastened it tight, almost squeezing the air right out of his lungs.

Yet, that was not the only thing to leave him breathless. She was so close to him, improperly close, and though her concentration was fixed upon the shawl, he could see her gaze being drawn to the still-exposed triangle of skin that tapered down from the base of his throat to the middle of his chest. It was not the lusty sort of observation he had become accustomed to with the wilder ladies of London, but more of a curious study.

Dedicated spinster that you are, I do not suppose you have had opportunity to look upon a gentleman in such a way. The notion charmed him, though he was careful to keep his expression blank.

“How sweet you are!” his mother crowed, gazing adoringly at Frances. “I do hope you will not be cold without that shawl? I have such things in my luggage, if you would care to return to the landau?”

Frances gave another sharp tug on the knot and peered up at Andrew, her glance both amused and still sharp with lingering hurt. “There is no need, Your Grace,” she said, turning back to Andrew’s mother. “We are not far from the Manor, and it is a glorious evening. I doubt I would be cold, even if I were as exposed as His Grace.”

Frances! Andrew’s eyes widened in horror, for his mother was not the sort of individual who cared for lewd jokes. So, it came as yet another surprise when he heard his mother cackling softly—the kind of laugh he had not heard from her lips in many a year. If ever.

“You are funny, Lady Frances!” his mother cheered, clapping her hands together. “When I was a young lady, I wish I had half of your wit. You must be a delight at balls.”

Frances feigned a look of distaste. “Never if I can help it, Your Grace.”

“Have you ever encountered such a wondrous creature, my boy?” Andrew’s mother looked to him with a broad smile that seemed to smooth away years of suffering and sadness. For a moment, he could see the woman she might have been before she married his father. The woman he had glimpsed only a handful of times before, when he was a child, and she sang to him in the nursery. As such, the truth spilled from his lips before he could hold it back.

“I have not, Mother.”

Frances flinched and turned her back to him, moving to weave her arm through his mother’s. “I hope you do not mind me being frank with you, Your Grace, but your son does not care for my japes and jests. Our humors do not align, you see. If I were a doctor, I would diagnose a complete disaster, and likely a great deal of expensive ointments and tinctures that would do absolutely nothing to reacquaint said humors.”

“How clever you are.” Andrew’s mother threw her head back in another disarming laugh. “That was a tremendous play on words, Lady Frances. I shall have to remember that for my return to Norfolk, so I may impress my acquaintances.”

What acquaintances? Andrew held his tongue, for he knew it was not his mother’s fault. Not really. She had married a man who did not want her to have friends, or any sort of life beyond being a wife and mother. It was a habit she had not been able to break, even after her husband’s passing, when she might have been free at last.

“You may have every last one of my witticisms, Your Grace,” Frances promised, beginning the slow walk back to the gates of Fernside Manor. “Ordinarily, I would charge a large fee to rival every last one of those pesky Romantics, but you are exempt. Like my dogs, I cannot be anything but generous to a beautiful lady.”

His mother seemed to radiate with happiness, leaning into Frances as she shuffled along the dusty road. “I know you are only being polite, Lady Frances, but you do not know, until you are old and gray, how much you miss hearing that you are beautiful.”

“I mean it, Your Grace,” Frances protested. “Wholeheartedly. If I were being polite, I would compliment your jewels, or your carriage, or your position in Society. All of that nonsense that everyone deems to be of the utmost importance, but I find to be very dull and usually unvaried. I used to have a skill, though it is likely rusty now, where I could guess someone’s station and style of carriage within the first minute of meeting.”

Andrew fell in step behind the two women, listening intently to their chattering.

“Is that so?” his mother gasped.

Frances nodded. “Anyone can do it. Shall I teach you?”

“That would be wonderful,” his mother encouraged.

Frances leaned closer to the older woman’s ear. “You spy upon the guests as they are arriving, and then you wait for the Master of Ceremonies to announce them. It is really rather simple.”

“Oh, Lady Frances!” His mother gave her a playful smack upon the arm. “You almost had me fooled!”

Frances winked. “The true skill is in knowing what all of that means, and what sort of person they will be, but I am afraid I have let that talent fall into disrepair. I rarely attend gatherings anymore.”

“But you must!” his mother urged, with a note of panic in her voice. “You should not hide yourself away, for you might find that, one day, you are too afraid to leave the confines of your home. Why, if you were to attend but a couple of balls, I imagine you would be married within a Season.”

Frances shook her head. “I am too long in the tooth for such things, Your Grace,” she confessed, tapping her incisors as if to prove the point. “My destiny is spinsterhood, with the company of my dogs and my family. That will be enough for me.”

“Well... I suppose I can understand that. There are far worse fates,” Andrew’s mother replied softly, catching him off guard. He had never heard her openly allude to her former misery in her own married life, though it had not been difficult to decipher.

Frances tilted her head to one side. “I daresay you are the first person who has not asked me why I am not scraping the *ton’s* barrel for whomever will have me. Your Grace, I do believe you are fast becoming my favorite person, and certainly the finest I have ever discovered abandoned at the roadside.”

“Oh no, you must not allow that to happen,” his mother agreed. “You should not accept the dregs, especially a lady as splendidly amusing and fair of face as you.”

Frances chuckled. “Now, I do believe *you* are the one being polite. My face is as fair as a lemon that has been left out in the sun, and equally as sour.”

“Ridiculous,” his mother retorted with a laugh. “Tell her, my boy.”

Andrew, who had been content to listen to the easy conversation flowing between the two women, was startled to hear himself being brought into the discussion. Truly, he could have walked behind them, listening to them for hours, for it warmed his heart to see his mother

so animated. It warmed him all the more, knowing that Frances was responsible for that good cheer, considering she would have had every right to be aloof as punishment for his earlier slight.

“Pardon?” He cleared his throat.

“Tell her she is pretty, my boy,” his mother replied, both women glancing back in anticipation. Frances, however, wore an expression of doubt, like she expected another insult.

Andrew straightened up. “She has a... rare appearance. It... um... befits her.”

“Befits me?” Frances snorted. “Did you mistake your words, Your Grace? I do believe the phrase is, “It becomes her.” Unless, that is not what you meant? In kind, do you mean “rare” in the finer sense of the word, or do you mean it as a kinder way of saying “unusual”? You will not offend me, Your Grace.” A weighted pause followed, but Andrew heard the subtext: *“Any more than you already have.”*

He swallowed uncomfortably. “I *did* mistake my words, Lady Frances,” he admitted, holding her defiant gaze. “Your appearance *does* become you.” He hoped she understood his subtext, too: *“I mistook my words earlier today, as well. I did not mean them.”*

“Is he always such a generous flatterer?” Frances pretended to fan her face, and he could tell she had not sensed his underlying meaning. If he wanted her to understand how sorry he was, he would have to tell her more simply.

His mother offered an apologetic look. “Do not be wounded, Lady Frances. He has never found it easy to say sweet things, but it is not his fault.”

Do not speak of it, Mother. Andrew cast her a warning glance, but she was too fixated upon Frances to notice. Nevertheless, she did not expand upon the remark, for it was as difficult for her to talk about as it was for Andrew.

“I am not wounded, Your Grace,” Frances confirmed, hitting Andrew with a steely look. “His Grace, on the other hand, might need some ointment for his injuries. One should never attempt to scale a fence they are not accustomed to, particularly one with spikes at the top.”

Andrew glanced down at his chest, discovering the dark red line that was appearing up the center. He had not even realized the sharp, iron fleur-de-lis had grazed him; he had been too concerned about his inadvertent, partial nudity.

That is what she was looking at, he realized, confused by the sudden twist of disappointment within him. Could it be that, after the painful civility and cold politeness he had endured from her after the stable incident, he wanted her admiration? Or, perhaps, he simply wanted what he could not have. Namely, her respect, the sweet softness of her informality, and the fledgling *something* that had begun to appear after she had saved his life.

“Why did you do that?” Frances did not hold back with her questions, once she was safely away from the demanded propriety of being in the company of a Dowager Duchess.

Sitting upon a rickety wooden chair in the dim light of the Manor kitchens, in an alcove where the cook could act as chaperone without actually putting effort into the task, Frances dipped a cloth into the pungent ointment she had pilfered from the household stores. It had not taken much convincing to get Andrew to let her take care of his injuries, though Frances was aware of the unseemliness of the situation. Nevertheless, the risk of discovery was low, for the Dowager was busy having an audience with her younger son, her future daughter-in-law, and the sisters’ parents.

Andrew, still holding the two ripped sides of his shirt closed in an act of unexpected shyness, gave a shrug. “Do what?”

“Why did you follow me?” She gestured for him to move the shirt aside so she could clean the graze. “Do not pretend that you did not, for there is no other reason you would have been there, failing to climb over a fence.”

He smiled faintly. “You made it look a great deal easier than it was, though that should not be such a surprise. You excel at everything.”

“Pardon?” She peered at him in disbelief, for that surely could not have been a compliment. Indeed, it did not entirely sound like one, considering the note of chagrin in his voice.

“There is nothing you cannot do, or so it seems,” he replied, still

holding his shirt closed. “When I saw you climb over the wall, I realized I would have to do the same. Not wanting you to see me, I waited until you had already gone over before I followed suit.”

Frances narrowed her eyes. “That does not explain *why* you followed me, in the first place. Particularly as you have just said you did not want me to see you. Are you some kind of deviant, spying upon women?”

She did not truly think he was, but she could not resist making a jab at his expense, at least until he told the truth of why he had trailed her through the woodland.

Andrew looked suitably appalled by the accusation. “Goodness no! I intended to speak with you, of course. Indeed, I wanted to—” He faltered and reached forward to take the cloth from her hand. “Might you turn away? You have seen enough of me, I should think. More than I ever thought to expose.”

Frances shrugged and pivoted in her seat, until she rested on the back of the chair. Folding her arms along the top of it, she settled her chin on them and stared out into the organized chaos of the kitchen. The cook, assisted by two young women, flitted hither and thither: stirring this, basting that, tasting the other. It was almost like a dance, seeing how they skirted around one another, wielding trays and bowls, accompanied by the squeaking metal doors of the ovens as they were opened and closed.

“I did not consider you someone with a coy bone in their body,” Frances commented, thinking of the flash of skin she had seen earlier.

Andrew sniffed. “The entire event is shameful enough without me getting you into trouble by having you daub ointment on my bare chest. You might desire to be a lifelong spinster, but that does not mean your reputation is without importance,” he explained, coming from a perspective she had not anticipated. “Your sister is still to marry my brother. I would not do anything to jeopardize that.”

Ah, there it is. Not concern for my wellbeing or reputation, but concern for the status and continuation of his family line. She shook her head subtly, wondering why she had even tried to consider anything different. He had already shown he had no affection or gratitude toward her, so why would he care how his actions impacted her position? It was all

about him and his family, and what could be gained through *her* family.

"I am still waiting for an answer, Andrew," she said coolly, wishing she did not like the intimacy of saying his name.

He sighed. "I wanted to... see how you were faring after the unpleasantness earlier today." He hesitated, and, just for a second, Frances wondered if he might apologize. If he did, she was ready to forgive. "I did not behave appropriately, considering all you had done for me. You must know how grateful I am that you came to my aid."

"Must I?" she shot back, annoyed by the way he kept evading a true apology. "How so, when it was as though an entirely different gentleman emerged from the forest? I can understand a fellow's need to spare his pride, but I did not deserve your unkindness."

"No, you did not," he agreed. "That being said, you did instruct me not to mention your act of rescue."

She dug her chin deeper into her forearm, to stop herself from whirling around. "True, but I did not instruct you to forget the matter altogether. Indeed, you were the one who said you did not mind lauding my daring achievement among everyone in this Manor."

"You are a confusion, Frances." Andrew huffed out a strained breath, though she could not tell if it was due to the pain of his injury or the frustration of their conversation. "You say one thing, and then you say the opposite. Why, I might say that *you* changed your behavior when we came out of the forest."

She twisted around, not caring what state of undress she found him in. "How dare you. I did not change, Andrew. *I* tried to spare your pride so you would not have to, but you trampled upon me to... what? Inflate your vanity instead of accepting the slight dent in your pride? Is humility really so uncomfortable for you?"

Breathing harshly, she struggled to avert her eyes as she looked upon his bare chest, glistening with the oily ointment he had applied. In the end, her anger drew her gaze upward, to meet his. After all, there was no use in admiring the sculpted, muscular physique of a gentleman who was anything but beautiful on the inside. She needed to know if there was some redemption to be found.

“Yes, it is,” he replied quietly. “I was not raised to value humility. I say that not as an excuse, but as a reason. If I did not show pride and strength and, yes, a degree of arrogance, then I would be punished. Or “educated,” as it was otherwise phrased.”

Frances’ nostrils flared at the audacity of the man. “Then, do explain how your brother is the epitome of humility, gentility, and generosity? My sister cannot speak highly enough of him, to the point where I am not sure if she has imagined his character.”

“He was... shielded from much of what I endured,” Andrew replied evenly. “As the eldest son, I was the one with the weight of expectation upon my shoulders. My brother had a kindly governess, and was, for the most part, ignored by my father. As such, he grew into the fine gentleman he is today, while I—” He trailed off, his eyebrows knitting together in consternation.

“While you—?” she prompted, trying to control her harsh breaths.

Andrew shook his head. “I really ought to retire to my chambers, so that I might dress in whole clothing and avoid alarming any more of the servants.” He stood abruptly, tying the shawl back around his waist. It appeared the conversation was over, with no apology and no further explanation of the past that had created the man he had become.

Frances longed to press the matter in her pursuit of finding redeeming features in Andrew, but the heavy expression upon his face held her silent. Evidently, the mysteries of his past were far worse than she ever could have suspected. Maybe that, in and of itself, was explanation enough for why he was the way he was.

What happened to you, Andrew? If you were to share the burden, it might lighten the load. Remaining seated, she watched him walk away from her and noticed, for the first time, a dejected slump in his shoulders. Clearly, offering up that small morsel of his youth and memories had taken its toll upon him.

“That gentleman has a sorry soul,” a soft voice cut through Frances’ thoughts, prompting her to turn and look up at the warm, flushed face of the cook, Mrs. Devin.

Frances tilted her head. “Do you think so?”

"I've seen enough of this world to know a troubled fellow when I see one. My Ernie, rest his soul, had that same look about him when we first met," the cook replied, settling down in the chair that Andrew had just vacated. She had a tea tray with her, which she placed upon an old, upturned potato crate, pouring out two cups and stirring in milk and sugar before Frances even had to ask.

"Did Mr. Devin recover?" Frances accepted the proffered cup of tea and took a welcome sip. It tasted sweet and creamy and earthy, just as she liked it.

Mrs. Devin nodded. "Oh aye, but not for many years. Only when I could finally get him to talk about it did he start to improve," she explained, in her usual voice of wisdom. "Turned out he was beaten terribly by his father, when he was a young'un. It's the way with eldest sons, I reckon; they're either the most honored and adored child or the most punished. It was the former with my own boy, of course. Wouldn't catch me raising a hand to any of my children."

"That is awful," Frances said quietly, unable to fathom how anyone could be so cruel to their own flesh and blood. After all, she had been raised within a family who had treasured both their daughters, never regretting that they had not been blessed with sons. Not out loud, anyway. Moreover, her family had not tried to force her into marriage, accepting whatever she chose to do with her future, and all of her other idiosyncrasies.

Mrs. Devin smiled. "I'm surprised you've not heard about him, M'lady. The servants haven't stopped chattering since he arrived with that darling brother of his." She took a deep sip of her tea and unleashed a satisfied sigh. "Then again, servants often have the good gossip before anyone else. Most of High Society—present company and present household excluded—don't notice servants, so they'll say things they shouldn't without fearing it'll get out."

"What have you heard?" Frances leaned forward in her chair, unable to contain her intrigue. Despite the way Andrew had spoken about her, and his inability to apologize, she was beginning to think that there was more to him than met the eye.

Mrs. Devin reflected Frances' motion, tilting closer. "His old man was a terrible brute. Treated his wife like dirt under his boot and did the same to His Grace when he'd try to defend his ma," she whispered.

“By the time the old wretch died, it was too late to undo all the bad that had been done. They couldn’t unlearn what they’d learned, if you understand my meaning?”

“I think so.” Frances nodded, horrified by the revelation. “Do you think that is why His Grace behaves in a manner that *seems* unkind?”

Mrs. Devin took a thoughtful sip. “I’d wager everything I own on that being the case,” she agreed, after a moment. “Either way, his unkindness wasn’t born into him. It’s probably all he knows.”

“But he is kindly toward his brother,” Frances pointed out.

“Aye, but consider you were raised in his family instead of your own. You’d be that way with your sister if you knew she was the only other person you could rely on,” Mrs. Devin replied. “Of course, you adore Lady Emmeline anyway, but I can’t think how else to explain.”

Frances cradled the teacup in her hands, sapping the warmth from the porcelain before bringing it to her lips. Her mother and father hated when she drank her tea that way, but, again, they would never dream of punishing her harshly for it. A despairing remark or a concerned look was usually the worst she would receive.

I was right... his behavior must be a façade. Fortifications that he has built in order to protect himself. She felt no triumph in the realization, only a twinge of sadness, for she doubted she would ever discover the true Andrew that had been hidden away inside. She had glimpsed it in the forest, but then his walls had gone back up. *That* was why he had seemed to change upon exiting the trees.

“How do you know all of this?” Frances drained what was left in her cup, extending it so Mrs. Devin could pour some more.

The cook chuckled. “As much as you strive to stay out of gossip, you always seem to end up being the center of it, M’lady. A couple of the scullery maids were going about their duties when they overheard His Grace speaking with Lord Croxley, just before you dragged His Grace here to the kitchens. Apparently, your effect on their mother has shocked them both. His Grace couldn’t stop talking about how your jests had made their mother smile, and Lord Croxley couldn’t believe what he was being told, which is when a few tidbits about their father came into the conversation.”

“Finally, my atrocious sense of humor has benefited someone,” Frances joked, while a small rush of pride swirled in her chest. She had not realized she could be of help, simply by being herself.

Mrs. Devin tutted playfully. “There’s naught atrocious about it, M’lady. I knew you couldn’t be so clever and witty for nothing. Might be, Lord Croxley won’t be the only one naming a Fernside daughter as his bride.”

“Pardon?” Frances jolted: her smile fading.

“You almost got His Grace to speak openly, M’lady. Do you think a gentleman like that reveals his pain to just anyone?” The cook flashed a knowing wink. “I reckon he’s taken a liking to you, M’lady, but he doesn’t know what to do about it. In your stubbornness, you’re equally matched.”

Heat pulsed in Frances’ cheeks. “He has certainly *not* taken a liking to me, Mrs. Devin!” she protested. “He cannot abide me. He is only grateful that I saved his life, nothing more.”

“Why would he have followed you through the woodland if he didn’t have a fondness for you?” the cook countered, with a bright smile.

Frances gaped at the older woman. “The Royal Court should dispense with spies altogether, and simply pay for the insight of household servants. Is there nothing you have not heard? Should I sew my mouth shut, or would that not help?”

“Oh no, you never say anything that could get you in bother,” Mrs. Devin replied, chuckling. “Like I said, it’s those who don’t consider us servants as people who say too much. All of this came from His Grace and Lord Croxley, and His Grace admitted he’d gone after you to try and make amends.”

“He did?” Frances clasped a hand to her chest, wondering what might have happened if she had not climbed over the wall. If she had allowed Andrew to catch up with her, might she have gained the apology she desired? If she had, what then?

The cook nodded eagerly. “Aye, he did. I put it to you, M’lady; why would he go to such lengths if he didn’t have a fondness for you? Most of his station and demeanor would just continue to pretend that they’d

done nothing wrong.” She paused. “But you’ll have to be patient with him, like I was with my Ernie. He’s likely fighting a battle in his head, between how he’d like to act and how he’s been raised to act. Sometimes, one side will win. Sometimes, the other.”

Rarely speechless, Frances stared down into her refilled cup, watching a ripple of cream swirl around in the center. Having never experienced courtship or flirtation of any kind, she did not know how to read the signs of affection. Even now, she was not sure she believed Mrs. Devin’s assessment. How could she, when most gentlemen found her strange at best, abhorrent at worst.

Yet, one thought kept creeping back into her mind, so new and unsettling that she did not know how to contend with it: *Could he truly... like me?*

“W ill His Grace not be joining us?” Frances eyed the vacant spot at the dining table, before letting her gaze flit toward the clock on the far mantelpiece. Everyone was ready to begin the meal, but there was no sign of the Duke.

The butler, standing guard by the door, cleared his throat. “I am afraid not, Lady Frances. He has taken ill and will be dining in his chambers.”

“Oh... very well. Or not, as is the case for His Grace.” Frances forced a smile, but she could not help thinking that she might be the cause of his sudden sickness. If he thought he had revealed too much to her, perhaps he would not wish to be in her company again. Vulnerability could hurt just as much as a fence spike to the chest.

The Dowager, on the other hand, chuckled in delight. “I must remember that one, too, Lady Frances! You really are as sharp as a dagger.”

“You are very kind to say so, though I am usually informed that I am much too blunt,” Frances replied, grateful to be seated next to the old woman. After the piece of information Andrew had imparted about his mother’s past suffering, Frances was more determined than ever to keep a smile upon the Dowager’s face.

The old woman clapped her hands together. “You never miss one, dear girl! Goodness, what a mind you have.” She looked to Frances’ mother and father. “You must be very proud to have such wonderful daughters. I have often wondered what it would be like to have daughters instead of sons, and I find myself increasingly envious.”

Frances' mother flushed with pleasure. "They are the joy of our lives, Your Grace."

"I feel as though I ought to be offended," Lord Croxley teased, while maintaining an adoring gaze at Emmeline. Indeed, Frances was beginning to worry that the poor man might go cross-eyed from all the affectionate staring.

The Dowager covered her mouth with her hand: her good humor slipping for a moment. "Oh no, I did not mean that, my darling. You know I adore you and your brother. I simply meant... I mean to say... I—"

Seeing her struggle, Frances swooped in. "Of course, you should not be offended, Lord Croxley. You should be relieved that your mother is so captivated by your future bride, for it means you will not have to suffer the lifelong battle of keeping your mother and your wife from being in the same room, lest it descend into fisticuffs and hair-pulling."

A ripple of laughter made its way around the dining room, and Frances smiled as she heard the Dowager's laughter join the rest.

"You are quite right, Lady Frances." Lord Croxley beamed with delight. "How could I be offended, when I am the one who is most enchanted by a daughter of Lord and Lady Fernside?"

Frances feigned injury. "Now, I feel as though *I* ought to be offended. I confess, I have never enchanted anyone. I have cursed a few people, though."

Another swell of laughter made its way around the dining room, though Frances' mother cast her a worried glance, as if to say: "*Remember the fine company we are in, Darling. Do not overstep in your jests.*"

"I could dine with you every evening, Lady Frances," the Dowager declared. "There would never be a dull moment. Indeed, I find you to be exceedingly enchanting, and I feel as though I have known you a great deal longer than a matter of hours."

Frances beamed. "It is entirely mutual, Your Grace."

“I do not know where I would be if your daughter had not happened upon me,” the Dowager continued, showering praise.

“I imagine you would still be in your landau, waiting for the driver and the footman to return. They must be halfway to the Lake District by now,” Frances quipped, eliciting another chuckle from the old woman.

“Yes, I daresay I would be!” The Dowager paused. “Have they been found yet?”

The butler shifted awkwardly. “They were located at the village inn, Your Grace. Our men brought them back, and they are... resting in the servants’ quarters. The landau is in the stables, where it will be repaired in haste.”

“Oh, there is no cause to hurry,” the Dowager replied. “It will be at least a fortnight before I require it again.”

The butler bowed his head. “Very good, Your Grace.”

“How did that come to pass?” Frances’ father asked with a curious expression. “The guards did not mention that you had departed the Estate, Frances.”

Frances smiled shyly. “I did not depart in the usual fashion.”

“Darling, you know you should not—” Her mother clammed up immediately, likely realizing that it would not be appropriate to mention that her eldest daughter had a penchant for scaling walls and temporarily escaping.

“I came to no harm.” Frances took a strip of smoked meat from her pocket and slipped it under the table, listening to the happy sounds of her beloved dogs chewing upon their treats. She had snuck them in before everyone else had gathered for dinner, though they would undoubtedly emerge when the next course was served. Only the watercress soup was safe from their adorable pleading.

The Dowager nodded effusively. “My son, on the other hand... I have never known him to behave in such a way, so I must apologize for any distress he caused your servants when he returned to the Manor in his state of disrepair.” She chuckled into her napkin. “He would not

explain why he had attempted to climb over a wall.”

Frances’ mother looked startled. “A wall?”

“Oh yes.” Between every spoonful of the soup that had just been served, the Dowager told the story of how they had encountered Andrew upon the road. Every so often, Frances chimed in with a detail or two, but not to increase Andrew’s humiliation. She merely wished to keep the Dowager chuckling, for the old woman had an incredibly sweet laugh, and it seemed to possess a sort of magic that revealed a youthful giddiness beneath her lined and weary exterior.

“If *he* were the one pursuing a beautiful young lady such as Lady Emmeline, I could understand his peculiar actions, but... my son does not care for such things,” the Dowager concluded, making Frances’ heart beat faster in her chest.

He is not pursuing me... you must not mistake his behavior, she chided herself, for that would be a dangerous thing to believe.

Lord Croxley mustered a low whistle. “What adventures you have had, Mother, and within minutes of arriving. I should have warned you that there is something wondrous in the air here.”

“For you, Lord Croxley, I think it is love you are breathing in,” Frances said, with a fond smile at her sister.

Emmeline pressed the back of her fingers to her pinkened cheeks. “Sweet Sister, you should not say such things!” The shine of her happy eyes belied her protest.

“But she speaks the truth, Emmeline,” Lord Croxley interjected, lifting his glass of wine. “I know it is rather early in the evening for a toast, but I should like it if you all charged your glasses to my betrothed: a lady who is as beautiful within as she is without. A lady who, though I have not been in her company long, I have come to love with the entirety of my heart.”

Emmeline fanned herself furiously. “It is the same for me, dear Peter.”

“To the Lady Emmeline.” Lord Croxley’s infectious smile spread to the rest of the table, as everyone raised their glasses and toasted to the enviably happy couple.

In any other situation, with any other pair, Frances would not have believed such a declaration of love, but the affection that Lord Croxley and Emmeline shared was a tangible thing. It radiated from both of them, until it could not be denied, and Frances was content to hope that the fire of their love would not be a quick-burning thing that would disappear within a year or two, but an everlasting ember that nothing could extinguish.

I will never have a love of my own, dear Emmy, so I will pray for yours until my last day upon this Earth.

In the back of her mind, thoughts of Andrew continued to nag, but without his presence in the dining room, they were much easier to push away.

“He does not care for such things.” His mother said it, in her own words. Do not entertain a fantasy, Frances, or you might find yourself in the scandal sheets. That, alone, was enough to cease all thoughts of why Andrew had come after her, and why he had shown a sliver of vulnerability.



Brooding in the gloom of his chamber, illuminated only by the firelight as the night loomed beyond the windows, Andrew had sought solace in a decanter of brandy. He had forgone dinner, despite his mother being present in the Manor, but that was the prerogative of being a Duke—no one dared to question his decisions, or comment upon any perceived rudeness.

No one but Frances. I imagine she had plenty to say about me as the family dined. He scowled into the flames: his fury heightened by the burning heat of the brandy in his belly. But he was not furious with Frances; he was furious with himself.

A knock at the door made him growl in the back of his throat. “Who goes there?” he called out, eager to remain in solitude so he could comb through his confused thoughts. In truth, he hoped that, somehow, the brandy could erase the entire day that had just taken place. Not only from his memory, but from existence.

I would begin it again. I would not speak of Frances that way, then I would not have followed her and failed to apologize. Nor would I have

mentioned... that man.

“Who else would it be, knocking upon your door at such an hour?” Peter entered with a smile, which soon vanished as he looked upon his sullen brother. “The butler said you were unwell. I suppose I should have known it was not the whole truth.”

Andrew swilled the glass of brandy in his hand. “I *am* unwell.”

“What particular affliction ails you?” Peter crossed to the opposite armchair and sat down, pouring a glass of liquor for himself. “You do not look poorly, though I daresay you will be, come tomorrow morning.”

Andrew snorted. “I needed to be alone. Mother would have argued if I had simply stated that, so a conjured sickness was required.”

“Is this because of your attempt to climb the wall?” Peter smiled and sipped his drink, while Andrew flushed with a returning wave of humiliation. How many ripples of such a thing would there be, before it went away?

“Does everyone know?”

Peter nodded. “Mother told the story at dinner. If you had been there, instead of hiding away in your chambers, you might have been able to explain yourself.” He paused, dipping his chin to his chest. “You should have seen her, Brother. I have never seen her in such high spirits, and though the tale was told at your expense, she told it with such vigor and amusement that I was not sure if a changeling had been sent in her place.”

“Did Lady Frances partake in my mortification?” Andrew muttered, secretly curious about the peculiar effect that Frances seemed to be having upon his mother.

How does she do it? How does she charm even the most troubled people, seemingly without effort? Even he could not count himself as immune, as he had delighted in her company during the past week. He would not admit it out loud, of course, but the truth could not be denied.

Peter chuckled. “She added color to the story, but I believe she did it only to make our mother laugh. It worked, too. I am astonished by

Mother's transformation, considering she would not leave her bedchamber before we left, even to say farewell." He shook his head. "By the end of dinner, Mother was laughing and sharing stories of her youth with Lady Frances and Emmeline."

"Ah... I had forgotten." Andrew pinched the back of his neck, feeling a touch guilty. "How was your meeting with Mother and Lady Emmeline? Is all well, or are we to gather our belongings and retreat without a wedding?"

A bittersweet expression graced Peter's face. "All is well, Brother. Had you come down to dinner, you would have heard my confession of love."

"Pardon?" Andrew flinched inwardly, for he had always found such things to be the height of vulgarity. In truth, he did not really believe that love existed, so such declarations smarted of chicanery to him.

"I love her, Brother. I cannot believe it, but I do," Peter replied quietly. "I do not know how I have become so fortunate. How many betrothals must there be, year upon year, where the pair cannot stand one another or are indifferent at best? Yet, here I am, utterly besotted with my future bride."

Andrew pursed his lips. "Once you have said it, Brother, you cannot retract it."

"Nor would I want to," Peter retorted defensively.

Andrew shrugged. "When you have been married for a few years, I shall ask you if you are still utterly besotted. I imagine your answer will have changed drastically."

"Why must you be this way?" Anger laced Peter's sharp words. "You have decided you will never marry, and I have supported that. However, I expect you to support me, in kind, considering I am the one who will bear the responsibility of our family's future. Be charitable, for once! Or pretend, at the very least."

The vehemence in his brother's voice astounded Andrew for a moment, as he had never heard Peter speak so harshly to him. They had their quarrels and squabbles, of course, but they rarely possessed any true anger.

"It seems I am incapable of saying the right thing, today," Andrew murmured, sitting back in the armchair. "Of course, I am happy if you are happy. Be joyful in your marriage. Heaven knows I would be glad if that could happen for you and Lady Emmeline."

Peter visibly relaxed, no doubt realizing there was more to Andrew's "sickness" than he was letting on. "Did you apologize to Lady Frances?"

"No."

"Are you intending to?"

Andrew finished off the brandy in his glass. "What would be the use? I will leave this place in a matter of weeks. I am certain Lady Frances and I can be civil until then."

"You know, Brother, you might find happiness too, if you were not so stubborn and proud," Peter remarked, with a pointed look. "After all, you climbed the wall for a reason. Why would you not finish what you began?"

Andrew shot his brother a dark look. "Do not mistake my actions, Peter. I felt dishonorable and sought to remedy that. There is nothing more to the apology I contemplated offering."

"If you insist," Peter replied, though those three words were drenched in doubt. His small smirk only confirmed that he suspected something.

The trouble was, Andrew could give no further protest, for he was also beginning to suspect that there was something more to his actions that day. Why else would he have told Frances about his father? Why else would he have tried to offer an excuse for his inability to apologize or show gratitude? Why else would he have followed her to the kitchens, when he could have taken care of his graze himself?

I must avoid her from now on. I must avoid her for both our sakes. For he was a man that did not believe in love, and if he did not believe in it, how could he hope to find it and offer it in return? Whatever this strange attraction was, it needed to be nipped in the bud. Immediately.

A couple of days later, the peace of the Manor was disturbed by the arrival of guests for the betrothal party. Many would journey from London on the day itself, but others were traveling from further afield. As such, the Manor would soon transform into an inn of sorts, accommodating Society's finest. A fact which bothered Frances, more than she cared to admit.

To escape the chaos, she took her dogs and slipped away into the woodland, with no intention of returning until early evening.

"I do not mind how you occupy yourself while the guests are settling into their chambers, but you *must* return for dinner... and with ample time to dress beforehand," her mother had all but pleaded during breakfast that morning. Of course, Frances had consented, though she would have preferred to be completely absent for the festivities. The only reason she would grin and bear it was for her sister.

Wandering through the shade of the forest, listening to the birds singing and twittering in the trees, Frances thought of Emmeline. The betrothal party would be held the following day, but Emmeline was already in a state of panic and excitement.

"I cannot sleep a wink, Sweet Sister. Indeed, I doubt I shall be able to sleep until after the wedding," the slightly younger woman had confessed the previous night, after sneaking into Frances' chambers and huddling beneath the coverlets.

Frances had held her sister tight. "You must, dear Emmy. It would not do to have a bride who looks as though she has been boxing at the London Docks. There is only so much that powder can do to help."

“Can you believe what he said at dinner?” Emmeline had swooned, nestling deeper into her sister’s warm embrace. “I thought I would die of happiness.”

Frances had stroked her sister’s long, lustrous hair. “You should not do that, either, or there will be no wedding. Live forever, instead, relishing in your happiness and making everyone green with envy.”

“You are not envious, are you?” Emmeline had sounded worried, peering up at Frances with suddenly sad eyes.

“Not at all, sweet Emmy,” Frances had assured, hugging her sister close. “A gentleman as wondrous as your future husband would entirely ruin my plans to become a half-crazed spinster, living in my eerie cottage in the woods with my dogs. It is better that I never find such a man, for I am quite content to become the origin of a frightening myth, to scare children by the fireside.”

Emmeline had giggled into Frances’ shoulder. “What would you say to a charming woodsman, then? Such a fellow would fit perfectly into your myth.”

“Heavens, no. A charming woodsman has no place beside a suspected witch, and I would not have the faintest idea how to behave around a man with abounding muscles,” Frances had teased, struggling to ignore the subtle pang in her chest. Deep down, she had a feeling she *was* envious, but it would pass in the way that every other envy had, over the years. Or so she hoped.

Following the trail that she had guided Lord Croxley and Andrew on during their first outing as a quartet, Frances hummed a tune to herself while tossing a stick for the bulldogs. Every time they brought it back, she spoiled them with scratches and compliments and belly rubs, before throwing the stick again. A routine that calmed her, and chased away any foolish, girlish notions of romance.

“I only need the two of you. Is that not so?” she asked the hounds as they ambled up to her. Piglet had retrieved the stick, this time, and dropped it at her feet.

Eris barked in agreement, and sat down with her chin tilted up, ready for a fresh batch of scratches.

Frances laughed and lavished both dogs with affection, before plucking up the stick. Hurling it up the sloping incline of the hill, which they had just approached, she smiled delightedly at the lumbering, clumsy manner in which the bulldogs chased after it. She did not care what anyone had to say; they were the perfect companions for her.

Swift footed, she made it to the top of the hill with ease, only to stop short as she crested the rise. There was someone else already atop her personal haven of peace, sitting upon the far edge with his back to her. She did not need to see his face; she knew who it was.

Before she could stop them, the dogs raced toward the figure, pouncing at his back. Andrew yelped in surprise, only to soften as he saw his furry, affectionate assailants.

You should not be here. You should be back at the Manor, providing assistance to your brother... and leaving me well alone, as you have done for the past few days. Irritation bristled within her, for though she had told herself not to hold any hope of Mrs. Devin's suspicions coming true, she had not expected to be ignored altogether.

Taking a moment to gather herself, she marched over to where Andrew now knelt. He did not bother to look up at her as he concentrated on stroking and scratching the dogs, but if he thought she was simply going to accept the frostiness he had shown her over the last couple of days, he was sorely mistaken.

"I did not think you would be the sort of fellow to shirk his duties," she remarked coldly, whistling to draw her dogs away. They came to heel instantly, both of them staring lovingly up at her with their tongues lolling out.

Andrew, with no distraction to use an excuse, finally met her gaze. "There is nothing I can do that my mother is not already doing," he replied flatly. "Besides, it is easier for my brother if I make myself scarce, so no one has to go through the trouble of bowing and scraping to a Duke. The attention should be his, and his alone."

"What of my sister, or is she of no importance?" It was a feeble retort, but Frances could not help it.

Andrew rolled his eyes. "Of course, I meant the attention should be for

my brother and your sister. I assumed it was implied.”

“You assume a lot of things,” Frances grumbled, folding her arms across her chest. “Is your mother well? I did not see her at breakfast this morning.”

Make no mistake, I may not be able to understand you, or tolerate you at times, but I will ensure that your mother continues to enjoy herself. Frances and the old woman had become firm friends in the days since she had arrived, which had been something of a balm to the sting of Andrew’s obvious detachment.

Andrew visibly flinched. “I have never seen her happier or in finer health.” He almost sounded offended by the change. “She took breakfast in her chambers, so she would have more time to ready herself for the guests. I will never comprehend why women of advancing years feel the need to beautify themselves.”

“No, I do not imagine you can,” Frances shot back in outrage.

He narrowed his eyes. “Why should you be insulted? She is not *your* mother.”

“Because she is a woman, and, one day, I shall be of “advancing years.” It is my duty to educate you when you are wrong.” She sniffed. “Have you never paused to contemplate that such ladies might be beautifying themselves for their own confidence? Of course, they can never look truly youthful again, but if they *feel* more beautiful, it will improve their mood, their manner, and put them at greater ease.”

Andrew seemed genuinely surprised by the snippet of insight into the mind of a woman. He canted his head, rubbing his chin in thought. Eventually, he mustered a small, apologetic nod.

“You are right; I had not contemplated that. I suppose, in that regard, there is some purpose and sense to such an act,” he conceded. “But why are you here, shirking *your* duties?”

Frances chuckled coldly. “I have no duties aside from keeping away from the Manor until dinner. I never wish to embarrass or shame my family, but I have a habit of saying things that are not always appreciated. As such, it is best that I stay away until the guests have had too much wine to remember anything I have said.”

“Do you mind my being here?” Andrew sounded nonchalant, but she noticed a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

She shrugged. “Technically, as a guest, I am not allowed to mind. That being said, I did not expect to have company on this excursion.”

“So, you do mind?”

She released an exasperated sigh. “I am apathetic.”

As you have been. She did not say that last part out loud, lest she appeared petty or wounded.

“I see.” He nodded slowly but made no move to leave. As such, Frances decided she would sit and stake her claim to the hill that he had intruded upon. That, however, seemed to disarm him, for he leaned sideways as if she were diseased.

She smirked. “Is there not enough distance between us?” She had left a considerable gap, yet he was behaving as if there was no space at all.

“I did not think you would sit near to me, that is all.”

“Where else would I sit?” she remarked.

He turned his face away. “That is not what I meant.”

“Then you ought to learn how to speak more plainly, for I do not know how else to interpret your words.”

His shoulders rose with a weighted inhale and sank as he sighed. “Very well. I did not think you would *want* to be near to me. We keep agreeing to be civil, and then that seems to... disappear.”

“Have I not been civil?” She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, while Piglet and Eris lay down on the grass on either side of her.

A sad smile turned up one corner of his lips. “You have. *I* have not.”

“I wonder if it is snowing in Hell,” Frances mumbled, somewhat

childishly.

“Pardon?”

She glanced at him. “That almost sounded like an apology, or a confession of responsibility. So, I wondered if it was snowing in Hell.”

“Ah, I see.” He laughed, but it had a hollowness to it. “Then, I suppose I ought to seize the opportunity while I am in an unusual disposition. I have been unnecessarily rude, Frances. I was... embarrassed, not only by the failed attempt to climb the wall, but by the things I spoke of when we were in the kitchens.”

Despite herself, Frances softened slightly toward him. “Naturally, I understand the humiliation of the former, but why should you be embarrassed about the latter? There is no shame in being honest, especially if it offers explanation for other things.”

“Perhaps, embarrassed is the wrong word. Uncomfortable might be more befitting,” he replied, shifting awkwardly.

Pondering what to say, Frances gazed out across the beautiful vista. The noonday sun shone down from a near-cloudless sky, but a gentle breeze kept the warmth from feeling too oppressive. The perfect summer day, in many respects, yet the sadness in Andrew’s demeanor made it seem as though it might rain.

“Is that why you have been avoiding me?” she said, at last, reaching out to pet Eris.

He did not reply. Instead, he followed her gaze outward, drinking in the glorious shades of green and the rippling effect of the sunlight as it swelled over the hills. She listened to his deliberate inhale and knew the medicinal properties of the fresh air and pretty surroundings were having a pensive influence over him. One could not escape oneself when faced with solitude and reflection.

“I am not accustomed to sharing details of my life with anyone beyond my family,” he murmured, as if to himself. “Even then, it is simply not discussed. It is more of an open secret that no one mentions, lest it somehow summon my father back from the grave.”

Frances gave Piglet a light nudge, and the bulldog loped over to

Andrew, settling his big head in the man's lap. Andrew immediately stroked the dog, and a look of calm washed across his handsome face.

"I cannot pretend to know what it is like to be raised in cruelty, but I can understand your reluctance to speak of it," she said. "The lingering effects of what you and your mother must have suffered are painful to see. Now and then, I notice your mother second guess herself, or become anxious that she might have said the wrong thing. A habit of fear, in which she still expects punishment. And you... seem to withdraw into yourself when you have displayed something you might consider a weakness, which is likely for the same reason."

He turned and stared at her, as if she had just peered directly into his soul. "You have perceived all of that?"

"It is a skill I have learned throughout my years of being on the outside of every social occasion. I listen, I observe, and I become aware of things that people believe they are expertly hiding," she explained. "That does not mean others notice, so do not worry. Your open secret is safe with me."

Andrew's eyes widened. "You continue to surprise me, Frances."

"In the pleasant way or the unpleasant?" She smiled, hoping to keep him at ease.

"Both." A half chuckle escaped his lips. "Sitting here with you, I feel more exposed than I did when my shirt was torn open. You have a manner about you that invites people to behave differently and to speak of things they usually would not, and I cannot figure out how you do it. It is some kind of sorcery; I am sure."

Frances ruffled Eris' ears. "Have I not told you?"

"Told me what?"

"I do plan to convince the county that I am a mysterious witch," she teased, grateful to garner another glimpse of the real Andrew beneath his proud façade.

A genuine smile curved his lips. "I am only too happy to offer testimony, though I do not think it would be wise to be too convincing. I would not want villagers coming after you with torches

and pitchforks.”

“That is why I have my trusty guard dogs.” She nodded toward Piglet, who was contentedly lying across Andrew’s legs. “Although, I fear they may be a touch too friendly. They would be more inclined to lick and love my persecutors into submission.”

Andrew laughed. “I envy you, Frances.”

“Why would you?” she replied, intrigued. To many in Society, her position was anything but enviable.

“You have such... freedom and warmth.” His eyebrows pinched together in consternation. “I imagine you have not been treated well by Society, and yet you hold no bitterness. You are unapologetically who you are, and... I would like to know how that feels. Alas, I fear I am entirely cold inside, and though I should have all the liberty in the world, being an unwed Duke of considerable fortune, I still feel... shackled.”

Frances leaned toward him and elbowed him lightly in the ribs. “You need some dogs, Andrew. That is the key to happiness. They are the excuse that won me my freedom, and when you see their joyful simplicity, you begin to realize that everything else is mostly extraneous. As long as you eat well, rest well, take fresh air and long walks in abundance, and appreciate the affection of loved ones, you cannot put a step wrong.”

“I shall remember that,” he said solemnly: his eyes turning down toward the spot upon his ribs that she had just bumped.

“Have you ever been betrothed?” she blurted out, guided by a suspicion. She knew why she had no desire to marry, but she was not sure about his reasons. And there did not seem to be a subtle way to introduce it into the conversation.

Andrew visibly stiffened. “No.”

“If you do not mind me saying, I find that rather unusual.” She knew she ought to leave it be, but her curiosity got the better of her.

He concentrated on Piglet, who headbutted him lightly in the stomach, eager for more scratches. “My father had a scheme to see me

married, but he passed before it could come to fruition. No announcements or promises were made, so I saw no reason to uphold his desires.”

“Ah—” Frances nodded, for that was less surprising. Clearly, after a lifetime under his father’s rule, Andrew had decided to obey none of his father’s wishes after he died. A very understandable response, in her opinion. However, there was someone else to consider. “Does your mother not wish to see you wed?”

Andrew shook his head. “Her experience of marriage was dire, to say the least, so she is content to let me do as I please. I doubt she would have consented to letting Peter marry, either, if the betrothal had not already been arranged many years ago.” He paused. “All of her worries have been allayed in meeting Lady Emmeline, though. Indeed, I think she is rather looking forward to the wedding.”

“I am pleased to hear it.” Slowly, Frances got to her feet. “Would you care to walk with me for a while? I realize we are unchaperoned, but no one will notice us while they are occupied with the arriving guests, and I certainly will not mention it to anyone.”

Andrew ushered Piglet off his legs and stood. “I should like that, Frances.”

Heading across the top of the hill, so they could follow a different trail through the western part of the forest, Frances took a deep breath to try and stop her heart from racing. In truth, she was not entirely certain that they would not be spotted, and if they were... well, it might mean the end of her freedom altogether. Her parents were extremely reasonable and generous, but they would not allow her actions to jeopardize Emmeline’s upcoming nuptials.

Are you worth that risk, Andrew? She supposed it did not matter, for they had already sat together, talked together, and now they were walking together. She was already entrenched in impropriety. All she could do was choose a path farthest from the Manor, and pray the guests did not decide to go for an afternoon stroll after settling in.

The sun was just beginning its descent toward the horizon, glowing a more muted shade of bronze that bathed the world below in a heavenly haze, when Andrew and Frances finally made their return journey to the Manor.

“Do you remember our explanation?” Frances whispered, looking more concerned with every step that brought them closer to the Manor.

Andrew nodded. “We were taking separate walks, and only happened upon one another a moment ago. I did not like the notion of you wandering alone, so I offered to escort you, and would not accept your refusal.”

“Excellent.” Frances puffed out a nervous breath, prompting Andrew to pause just shy of the tree line.

“If you would prefer, I could stay here while you venture to the Manor first?” He did not enjoy seeing her in such an anxious state, especially after the blissful afternoon they had spent in one another’s company. Just as she had said, true contentment could be found in the simplest of things: walking through wilderness and quiet forest, stopping whenever their legs tired, and speaking only when they desired to, instead of feeling obliged to fill the silence.

Frances hesitated. “I suppose that would be less perilous.” She seemed reluctant to leave him behind, which struck him in a way he had not anticipated. *He* did not want to separate from *her*, either. Indeed, there was a part of him that wanted to be seen at her side, for he could think of no finer place to be.

“Go on ahead. Once I see you have reached the steps, I will follow,” he urged, feeling a newfound determination to protect her. He owed her that much, considering their afternoon of aimless wandering had made him feel more alive than he had in his entire existence.

Frances offered a kindly smile. “How furtive of us. Why, one might mistake us for secret lovers.” She flashed a mischievous wink and set off with her dogs in tow, having no notion of how those words would render him breathless.

Secret lovers? It would have sounded brazen and vulgar from the lips of the young ladies he usually encountered, but, from Frances, it twisted in his abdomen like a method of torture.

“If only such a thing were possible,” he whispered, for he could no longer deny the effect she had on him. A fledgling affection kept trying to take flight within his heart, unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It was not lust or desire or a mere distraction: it was stronger than that, more cerebral than physical.

All afternoon, he had stolen discreet glances at her, admiring the elegance in her gait. It stood in stark contrast to her robust figure, which should not have permitted such grace. Nevertheless, she moved like a dancer, further confirming the fact that she was a woman of many sides. Her sharp wit could give way to sympathy and compassion, her boorish manner could shift into gentle understanding, her brash laughter could become a kind word, her furrowed brow could soften into peaceful joy. Every last switch of character able to occur at a moment’s notice.

How would we have fared if a betrothal arrangement had been made between us? He had considered it several times throughout their walk, and though he strove to find distaste and disapproval in the notion, he had not been able to. Indeed, by the end of their excursion, he had come to find the idea rather... agreeable.

“Of course, that is only because it would never happen,” he told himself sternly, as he watched Frances stride across the emerald lawns toward the Manor. She halted every now and again to lavish affection upon her bulldogs, whom Andrew had come to appreciate almost as much as their mistress.

I could not put such a lady in the prison of matrimony. I would not clip her

wings, and feel this... fondness turn to bitterness and loathing. He had never heard of a truly happy marriage, and though he hoped his brother and Lady Emmeline would be an exception, he knew he was not capable of giving someone lifelong contentment. After all, love was an important ingredient, and the small quantity that he possessed had already been given to his brother and his mother.

Frances had just reached the gravel driveway, where a carriage sat waiting, when an arm stretched out of the carriage window and waved to her. Andrew looked on with vague interest, noticing a few bemused gestures coming from Frances. Indeed, though he was at a fair distance, it appeared Frances could not hear whatever the person within the carriage was trying to say.

Just then, the carriage door swung open, and a familiar face appeared in the gap, prompting Andrew's heart to lurch in alarm. Before he could properly think about what he was doing, he broke into a slow run, heading for the driveway.

Of all the people in all of Society, why do you have to be here? I thought I had ensured that you would not be invited.



“Are you going to direct me to my chambers or are you going to continue to stand there as if there is not a single thought in your head?” the haughty young woman asked, staring at Frances as though she were a mangy stray she had encountered in the street.

Frances smirked. “You have not yet given me your name, Miss. How am I to know if you are a guest, or if you are an intruder masquerading as a visitor? There is valuable silver in the Manor, and I should hate to be the one responsible if it suddenly went missing.”

“I beg your pardon!” The woman's cheeks turned purple with fury, which only deepened as Frances laughed.

“You would not be the first to attempt such a daring robbery, Miss,” she insisted, reveling in every moment of this rude woman's outrage. “It is rather easy, these days, to find garments that *appear* expensive, though a carriage like this is rather more difficult to find... or steal.”

The woman looked ready to slap Frances, but the two bulldogs who

growled at Frances' sides seemed to make the woman think twice about an attack.

No, you do not like her either, do you? And you are never wrong about a person. Indeed, she now understood why Piglet and Eris had been so sweet toward Andrew. He was not at all how he seemed, or how he presented himself, and even if she only got to see his true self during clandestine walks through the forest, it was enough to thaw any residual coldness between them. There had been no apology for past transgressions, of course, but she was more willing to forgive on the merit of his behavior when they were alone.

"How dare you speak to me in such a crude manner," the woman huffed, leaning back into the shadow of the carriage to avoid the wrath of Piglet and Eris.

Frances smiled sweetly. "I do not know who I am speaking to, Miss, so how can I know if I dare or not? Is it not polite to introduce yourself before you begin a tirade of insults?"

"I am Rachel Hodge, daughter to the Marquess of Cooke!" the woman declared, as though that meant something very important indeed. Childish though it might have been, Frances could not wait to introduce herself in return, and watch the woman's arrogance crumble.

As such, she stuck out her hand. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Rachel. I am Lady Frances, eldest daughter to the *Earl of Fernside*."

The color drained from Lady Rachel's face: her mouth falling open in horror. "That cannot be!" she protested, finding her voice a few seconds later. "An Earl's daughter would not be alone with two... filthy creatures, nor would she be dressed as a peasant."

"Would you like me to call my father out here, so he can confirm my identity?" Frances smiled, unbothered by the insult. She was used to far worse, from far more vicious ladies. Besides, she was attired for practicality, not parading. If she wore fine gowns in the forest, they would be ruined by the time she returned, as she had proven when she had been knocked into the drained fishpond.

Lady Rachel scowled, wrinkling up her smooth brow in a rather

unpleasant fashion. "A bluff, nothing more."

"Are you certain of that?" Frances gestured toward the Manor, fully prepared to go through with the threat if Lady Rachel did not relent.

At that moment, the young woman's entire demeanor altered, shifting from conceited gremlin to saccharine cherub. Long, dark lashes fluttered around blue eyes that, a second ago, had been as cold as a frozen lake. She toyed girlishly with a strand of silky blonde hair that framed her pretty face in two curled ringlets, while the rest was fashioned in a braided bun. Indeed, she would have been exceedingly beautiful, if her actions were not so ugly.

"Your Grace, what a lovely surprise!" Lady Rachel cooed.

Slowly, Frances turned, just in time to see Andrew running the last few paces to where she stood. It did not require an impressive intellect to understand the situation, for Andrew looked as horrified as Lady Rachel looked delighted.

Is she one of your former conquests? Frances could not recall reading of any Lady Rachel in the scandal sheets, but names were occasionally omitted, or replaced with a single initial. There had certainly been an "R" or two, associated with Andrew.

"Lady Rachel, I did not expect to see you here," Andrew replied flatly. "Were you invited by my brother?"

So, the invitation did not come from you. Frances wished she could have felt relief, but she was too busy contending with the jab of jealousy that pulsed in her chest. She did not want to be a conquest or a secret lover, but the wayward part of her would not have minded meaning *something* to Andrew.

Lady Rachel giggled behind a beringed hand. "You are too silly, Your Grace. Of course, he did not invite me."

"Then who did?" Andrew pressed, a note too intensely. It did not go unnoticed by either lady.

She is definitely someone to him. Is this how he treats all the ladies who have tried to desire him? The possibility jarred Frances, though she reasoned that any prior ladies might not have met the real him. They

would only have encountered *this* version of him: the cold, proud, dismissive Duke who would not lower his guard. Or, maybe, she was simply trying to make excuses for him. Excuses he might not deserve.

Lady Rachel flinched, but swiftly recovered. “Lady Emmeline. We share an acquaintance in Lady Penelope, and when Penelope asked if she might bring a friend, an invitation was sent to me.” She smiled, leaning against the side of the doorjamb. “Are you not pleased to see me?”

“Are you to reside at the Manor?” Andrew evaded the question, but it was fairly obvious that he was not even remotely pleased to see her.

Lady Rachel glared at Frances. “I am to stay in guest chambers with Lady Penelope, though I have arrived first. At least, that would be the case if the servants were doing what they are paid to.”

“I have been trying to explain to Lady Rachel that I am the Earl of Fernside’s eldest daughter. Apparently, she still does not believe me,” Frances said, with a knowing smile at Andrew. The dramatic irony, known only to them, seemed to relax him, coaxing a small smirk onto his lips.

He offered Frances his arm, much to the visible disgust of Lady Rachel. “She is who she says she is, Lady Rachel. I do hope you have not been too severe toward her, or you might find there are no chambers for you to reside in for the next couple of evenings.” He cast a discreet wink at Frances. “You must have called her a servant in jest, yes?”

“B... but she is... she does not... well, I cannot be blamed for the mistake, considering how she is attired!” Lady Rachel immediately became defensive, no doubt realizing that she had made a tremendous error. Regardless, that did not seem to be stopping her from making further insults.

Frances chuckled. “Would you walk through the woodland in your finery, Lady Rachel? I think not, unless you had a ridiculous fortune, and could purchase a new gown for every day of the year.”

“I would not walk through the woodland at all, Miss—I mean, Lady Frances,” Lady Rachel retorted, her gaze darting toward the sight of Frances’ hand resting upon Andrew’s forearm. “And would someone

get rid of these dogs before they destroy the varnish upon my carriage?"

Frances' mood darkened in seconds. "They are nowhere near your carriage, Lady Rachel, and they are as much a part of this Manor and this family as I am. I am not prone to vengefulness or pettiness, but if you continue to berate my exceedingly well-behaved dogs—who, I might add, are far better behaved than you—you might find that His Grace is right, and you do find yourself lacking a chamber for the next few nights."

She certainly did not feel like being accommodating toward this conceited harpy, who would undoubtedly carry on being a nuisance throughout her brief stay. Indeed, if Lady Rachel had not mentioned she was a friend of Lady Penelope, Frances would have had the driver turn the carriage around, with Lady Rachel inside it, without further delay.

I will not embarrass you, Emmy, no matter what this woman says to me. Lady Penelope had been a friend to Emmeline ever since they were children, and though many ladies of her ilk became affected over time, Lady Penelope remained as pleasant as she had always been. As such, Frances did not wish to cause offense by sending her sister's friend's friend away, though she might consider advising Lady Penelope to make better acquaintances.

"I did not realize you were so close to Lady Penelope," Andrew chimed in, somehow reading Frances' mind. "Last I heard, the two of you were in the midst of a quarrel."

Lady Rachel waved a dismissive hand. "That is all in the past, Your Grace. It was a silly argument, now resolved."

Or you resolved it so you might gain an invitation to the betrothal ball, Frances surmised, not trusting a single thing about this woman. But if Lady Rachel had gone to such lengths, did that mean she was here to try and claim Andrew for herself?

"I will send footmen out to aid you with your luggage, Lady Rachel," Frances announced, eager to be away from the woman altogether. "Your Grace, might you escort me inside?"

Andrew nodded. "It would be my pleasure, Frances."

It was a simple mistake to make, now that they had grown accustomed to dropping honorifics with one another, but the flicker of pure fury that washed over Lady Rachel's face made it clear that the blunder had not gone unnoticed. And Frances had the dreadful suspicion that she would be the one punished for the mistake.

Over the course of the next day, Andrew and Frances were as ships passing in the night. Both were pulled toward their contingent of guests, while Andrew had the additional challenge of trying to evade Rachel. That, however, was much easier said than done, for she seemed determined to be his constant shadow.

“Have you also been turned into a pack horse?” A welcome voice invited Andrew to turn, as he was halfway along the landing, wielding two large boxes of what appeared to be dried wreaths. He did not know what purpose they were supposed to serve, nor did he care, for undertaking menial tasks was the only way he could keep out of Rachel’s path.

He smiled as Frances approached, carrying an even larger stack of boxes. “I never thought I would become part of a decorating council, yet here I am, ferrying some sort of floral nonsense to the ballroom.”

“My mother is nothing if not frugal,” Frances explained, setting her boxes on a nearby chair. “She adores fresh flowers but considers them an unnecessary expense. Those wreaths are at least as old as I am and have seen countless balls, gatherings, and a nuptial here and there.”

Andrew made a noise of agreement. “Fresh flowers look pretty for a few days, and then they die. Your mother is wise not to bother with such luxuries, though I can feel my nose itching from the dust on these things.”

“Until your eyes begin to stream, you have not carried enough boxes,” Frances teased, making him realize just how much he had missed her candor and her cheerful presence. Had it really only been a day since

they had enjoyed an afternoon of walking together?

Perhaps, we would not be noticed if we were to sneak away for an hour or two. I have come to crave the fresh air and revitalizing constitutionals. He considered asking, but another voice rudely interrupted.

“You must be taking your roles as brother-in-law and sister-in-law very seriously,” Rachel declared as she rounded the top of the curving staircase and marched toward the pair. “I rarely see the two of you apart. Pray tell, what has you both so amused? It is inconsiderate not to share a jest.”

It is inconsiderate to intrude upon a conversation you are not part of. Andrew longed to chide the troublesome young woman aloud, but he refused to lower himself to her level of churlishness.

Frances gestured toward the boxes of dried flowers. “We were merely pausing to discuss the ball decorations. There is no jest, I am afraid, other than my mother’s choice of wreaths. She will not be rid of them until they have all crumbled away to nothing.”

“They are very old fashioned.” Rachel peered into the nearest box and turned up her nose. “Goodness, they reek of mold. I hope you are not intending to hang those in the ballroom?”

Frances’ eyelid twitched. “We are, as it happens. Would you care to assist?”

“I should think not,” Rachel scoffed. “Actually, I came to find you, Your Grace. A few of the other guests are going to take a picnic down to the fishpond, and I thought I would invite you. I know how fond you are of picnics.”

Andrew stared at Rachel as though she were quite mad. “When I have you ever known me to picnic? You must have me mistaken for another gentleman.” He hoisted his boxes of wreaths higher, for his grip was slipping. “Besides, as you can see, I am otherwise engaged.”

“Pay him no heed, Lady Frances,” Rachel crowed, weaving her arm through his. “When we were younger, and I summered at the Reeves Estate, there were always lavish picnics. He would pretend he did not enjoy them, but that was only for the sake of maintaining his reputation as a dark and brooding creature of mystery.”

A look of uncertainty passed across Frances' face. "You summered at Reeves Hall?"

"Oh yes, for many years," Rachel replied proudly, while Andrew tried to pull his arm away from hers. If he had not been holding such a heavy load, he might have managed it. "His father and my papa were as close as brothers, so I know the family very well. One might even say that I am part of the family, considering I used to call his father, "Uncle." I even read the eulogy at his funeral."

Andrew's chest clenched in a vise of irritation. "You did no such thing, Lady Rachel. You read a poem, though no one asked you to, and upset my mother in the process."

"The Dowager was heartened by my poem," Rachel argued, oblivious to everything but her own version of events. A facet of her character that annoyed Andrew above all else.

Frances gathered up the boxes, evidently uncomfortable. "I wish I could stay and listen for longer, but some of us have a luncheon of dust and dried fronds to look forward to, rather than a delicious picnic." She cast Andrew a strange look as she passed him, heading for the stairwell. He had never seen that expression upon her face before, but it looked a great deal like defeat.

Surely, you are not threatened by the likes of Rachel? The subtext of his thoughts gave him cause to worry for a moment. If Frances *was* threatened, what did that mean? Could it be that she was beginning to feel something for him, as he was for her? It spelled disaster, yet he could not draw his gaze away as he watched her descend the stairs. Only when she had disappeared from view did he return his reluctant attention to Rachel.

"You have your answer, Lady Rachel," he said wearily. "Enjoy your afternoon of revels."

He tried to walk away, following the path Frances had just taken, but Rachel tugged on his arm. Given his size and stature, the yank barely jolted him, but if *he* attempted to pull away more vigorously, Rachel would be the one falling flat upon her face. He might not have cared much for her, but he did not wish to cause her injury.

I would not cause any lady injury of any kind—

“You are not the host,” Rachel complained, pressing into his side in a most unsettling manner. “Why should you not spend your afternoon in leisure with the rest of us? I have already informed Lady Penelope, Lord Kinley, and Lord McIver that you will attend. If you do not, you will humiliate me.”

He drew in a deep breath, struggling with his temper. “Then you should not have informed them before you knew, with any certainty, of my plans. Offer them my apologies, but I will not be picnicking while there is work to be done.”

“Why should you do it?” Rachel pouted, tossing her glossy, blonde hair. “Is that not what servants are for? Are they so bone idle here in the countryside that they must rely upon the assistance of their superiors?”

Andrew narrowed his eyes at the pestering woman, scrutinizing her at close proximity. He had always thought her to be very fine in appearance, with a classical beauty that would have given any gentleman pause. Yet, her parents had ruined any loveliness she might have possessed by spoiling her rotten. Entitlement, rather than appeal, radiated from her.

Superiors? I daresay even the chambermaids in this Manor are superior to you, Rachel. He held his tongue, somewhat shocked by his thoughts. Before coming to the Chiltern Hills, he might have agreed with her, for he could not recall having more than a cursory conversation with any of the servants at his own estate. However, in watching the way that Frances involved herself with all walks of life—gossiping with the cook, flattering her lady’s maid, jesting with the gardeners, and commending the fine work of the ostlers and stable hands—he had realized that he might have been missing out on ready companionship, due to the habits he could not shake.

“They are not bone idle,” he argued protectively. “Even now, they are running hither and thither to ensure everything is prepared for tonight. I have *chosen* to help. I have not been asked. Indeed, I might enjoy the ball more, knowing I had some part in creating it.”

Rachel guffawed. “You were never very convincing in your japes, my darling Duke. It is not in your nature to be amusing. You ought to leave that to born jesters, such as Lady Frances.” She snickered behind her hand. “She certainly has the face of a fool. I have never seen such

an ill-proportioned lady in all my life!”

“Enough,” Andrew hissed, praying Frances was nowhere within earshot. As long as he was in this Manor, or close to her company, he would not permit anyone to speak unkindly of her.

Reeling back, Rachel stared at him as though she were staring at a ghost. “Come now, you cannot think she is pretty?” Her eyes squinted. “I imagine there are more beautiful toads to be found in this dire fishpond where we are to picnic. You must agree that Fernside Manor pales in comparison to Reeves Hall? Oh, why could you not have held the ball there, instead? I miss it, so.”

“You are a guest, Lady Rachel,” he retorted. “Behave like one. And do not forget, where station is concerned, she is considerably above you.”

Rachel’s petite nose wrinkled in disgust, as she wrenched herself away from Andrew in a suitably dramatic fashion. With any luck, she would turn her perceived slight into silence, refusing to seek him out or speak to him until the ball was over and she departed the Manor again.

You have utterly disrupted the peace I have come to treasure here.

“If you would marry me, like you are supposed to, my station would rival that of most ladies in the country,” she shot back, puffing out her chest. “As such, I will behave as the Duchess I am meant to be. Nay, as my papa and yours *promised* I would be.”

Andrew’s insides twisted into a knot. “There was no such promise, and if you continue to fabricate untruths, you will suffer perpetual disappointment.”

He stalked away without another word, for he did not trust himself not to spew vehemence at the troublesome woman. Yet, he could not ignore the call that echoed after him.

“You *will* obey your father’s final wishes, darling Duke! You cannot escape your duties, and you certainly cannot escape me!”

As threats went, he knew she was not one to bluff.

“**Y**ou look magnificent, Emmy,” Frances cooed in adoration, from her perch at the end of her bed. As ever, when there were gatherings being held in the Manor, her chamber transformed into a dressing room for her beloved sister.

Emmeline turned shyly, grasping the flowing skirts of her exquisite, emerald-green gown so it would sway better with her movement. Trimmed with embroidered gold ribbon at the hem, capped sleeves, and along the neckline, with a wider band of gold beneath the bust, the young woman looked like Celtic royalty. A simple tiara of gold, adorned with emeralds, completed the regal image.

“Will Peter like it?” Emmeline reached for her silk fan, wafting cooling air at her flushed face.

Frances beamed from ear to ear. “A doctor should be sent for, as there is every chance his eyes might stretch so wide that they fall out of his head.”

“Sister!” Emmeline adopted a look of amused horror. “That is a terrible thing to say!”

Frances cackled. “Very well, then I shall say it more plainly—he will think himself the most fortunate gentleman in Christendom, and he will be the envy of every man present. *You*, on the other hand, shall be the envy of every lady. Mark my words, by the beginning of next week, green will be the demanded color at every seamstress and dressmaker in England, which, in a way, is rather ironic.”

“Ironic?” Cariad glanced back at Frances with an expression of

bemusement. It likely served as a welcome distraction, for the poor lady's maid could not get Emmeline to stand still long enough to curl the framing tendrils at the front of the excitable woman's face. Soon enough, she would lose her patience.

Frances nodded. "Green is the color of envy, after all."

"Ah, of course!" Cariat clicked her tongue. "I should've figured that one out on my own. I might've done if M'lady would hold still."

Laughing, Frances got up and walked to Emmeline, forcibly turning her back toward the mirror and holding her there. "You must allow dear Cariat to complete her tireless work, or she might chase you from this room with that curling rod."

"Apologies." Emmeline continued to fan herself. "I cannot concentrate on anything but the night to come, but I promise I will not move an inch until I am complete."

Cariat mustered a relieved sigh and took hold of a strand of bronzed hair, winding it around the length of iron that had surely cooled by now. "I don't mind your giddiness, M'lady, but I'd hate to singe off your beautiful locks because you're jittering around like a rabbit with its tail on fire."

"I shall be like a stone," Emmeline promised, standing perfectly still. Yet, her eyes glittered with the excitement that bubbled beneath the surface.

Frances rested her head on her sister's shoulder and met her gaze in the mirror's reflection. "You are not nervous?"

"I am, but it is not like the usual sort of nerves," Emmeline replied, unable to stop smiling. "It is a good sort of nervousness, if that exists?"

Frances nodded. "Certainly, it does."

"I cannot wait to dance with my betrothed and share my joy with friends I have not seen in a while," Emmeline went on: her breaths quickening. "They have all been having such fun while I have been contending with... preparations and organization and suchlike. Although, it has been wonderful to spend time with the Dowager. Is

she not a delight?"

Some have been having more fun than others. All day, Frances had done her best to forget her encounter with Lady Rachel. She did not care if a haughty young lady insulted her, but she had been somewhat shaken by the knowledge that Lady Rachel was well acquainted with Andrew and his family. Better acquainted than he had let on.

"She is," Frances agreed, wishing she had been able to spend more time in the Dowager's company. However, as she was not the bride nor the center of the betrothal party, there had been little excuse to have a leisurely moment with the older woman.

Emmeline cringed as the rod came perilously close to her nose, despite it being in skilled hands. "She could not stop talking about you, dearest Franny. I adore her, but I do not have your talent for making people laugh. There were many occasions in which we sat in complete silence, neither of us knowing what to say. Still, I think she is content to have me as a daughter-in-law. At least, I hope she is. Might you investigate for me?"

"Of course, though you have nothing to fear," Frances assured. "I have it on good authority that she is utterly enchanted by you and is looking forward to the wedding."

Emmeline's eyes widened. "You do? Who told you so?"

"His Grace mentioned it in passing when we crossed paths the other day," Frances admitted, as she observed her own reflection. Would Andrew find her beautiful?

Attired in a gown of dark blue with silver trim and a silver ribbon beneath the bust, the ensemble was far bolder than her usual choices. As such, she could not tell if it flattered her or emphasized the stockiness of her robust figure. In truth, she rather felt like a dairy cow that had been draped in silk.

Perhaps, I can make my introductions to a few people, ensure my sister is having a lovely time, and then slip away to spend the rest of the night outside. The strain of being social among her peers already weighed heavily upon her shoulders, and she had not even set foot in the ballroom yet.

At that moment, she realized that Emmeline and Cariad were both staring at her.

“Is something the matter?” Frances swallowed thickly. “Do I have a mark upon my gown?”

Cariad broke the odd silence first. “I didn’t realize you were spending time in His Grace’s company. Last you told us, you wouldn’t have minded him going straight back to Norfolk, missing the wedding altogether.”

“I never said that,” Frances protested, squirming a little. “Besides, as I said, we crossed paths by accident. We have not been closely acquainted.”

Cariad arched an eyebrow. “Maybe so, but you must’ve had quite the discussion if he informed you of his mother’s opinion about Lady Emmeline.” She paused, squinting up at the ceiling. “And if that was the base of your discussion, it must’ve happened recently. The Dowager only arrived a few days ago.”

“I cannot speak for him, so I do not know why he decided to tell me of his mother’s thoughts,” Frances replied: her cheeks ablaze. “Perhaps, he decided to be kind for once, knowing Emmy would be anxious about meeting her mother-in-law.”

A doubtful laugh escaped Cariad’s lips. “Why are you so red in the face, M’lady? Are you certain there’s not more to your tale? You know you can tell the two of us anything, and it won’t go beyond these chambers.”

“It is... warm in here!” Frances hurried toward the window, sliding it up to allow some fresh air into the suddenly stifling room. Conversation and gentle music filtered up from the gardens below, where guests were enjoying an evening constitutional, before the ball properly began.

A hand upon Frances’ shoulder made her turn with a start.

“We are only teasing, Sister,” Emmeline urged, offering an apologetic smile. “It is just so peculiar to hear of a comforting word coming from His Grace, but then he barely says anything to me, so I cannot truly judge his character. Peter says he is not as severe as he seems, so

perhaps you are right, perhaps he did tell you in order to allay my fears.”

Frances took a slow, nervous breath. “I do believe that was his intention.” She paused, eager to change the subject. “Tell me, what do you know of Lady Rachel?”

“The less said, the better, for I do not like to be unkind,” Emmeline grumbled, with a grim expression. “If Penelope had revealed which friend she planned to bring, I would have retracted the invitation. Not to Penelope, you understand—I adore *her*, but there are few in Society who can abide Lady Rachel. I have heard the word “insufferable” being bandied about.”

Cariad nodded in agreement, as she cooled the curling rod: her work done. “The servants are terrified of her and draw lots to see who’ll have to attend her. Fortunately, I haven’t had to deal with her, or I might do something that would see me booted out of the Manor.”

“Has anyone mentioned her relationship with His Grace?” Frances realized she might be about to get another round of curious stares, but she needed to know. Maybe, Lady Penelope had imparted some knowledge to Emmeline.

Emmeline frowned in thought. “I remember there being some gossip that she was set to marry him, but that came to nothing. Rumors, all too often, turn out to be precisely that—a rumor. But that must have been a long while ago, as I recall being much younger. I only remember because I was confused.”

“Confused?” Cariad chimed in.

Emmeline nodded. “Back then, I assumed that Franny was betrothed to the elder son, the way I was betrothed to the younger. It was silly, but I thought that was the done thing: if there were two sisters from one family, and two brothers in another, they would be promised to one another from birth.” She brightened. “Anyway, Lady Rachel was likely the one who started the rumor, in the vain hope that it might come true through the sheer force of willing it into being.”

That is somewhat understandable. Lady Rachel spent a great deal of time around Andrew and his estate. Maybe, she assumed she would become his bride by association alone. It perturbed her that she cared so much. She

had never cared about the affections or attentions of a gentleman before, at least not to this extent.

Just then, a knock came at the door, distracting all three women.

Their mother poked her head around, wearing an anxious smile. “The majority of the guests have arrived, darling Emmeline. It is time for you to make your grand entrance. Your father has gathered everyone together around the entrance hall, under the pretense of a welcome speech.” She stuck out her hand. “Come now, while the audience is not diverted by the orchestra or the dining room!”

“You shall charm them all,” Frances whispered, pulling Emmeline into her arms for one last, encouraging embrace. “Go and dance and be merry and gaze adoringly at your betrothed, who will not be able to draw his eyes away from your beauty or your wondrous being.”

Emmeline smiled as she pulled away. “I do so love him, Sister.”

“As you should, for he is a rare gentleman. Hold onto him with everything you possess and be... blissfully happy, for the rest of your lives.” Frances leaned down to kiss her sister’s brow, before shooing her away with a playful shove.

Staying back, Frances stood and stared at the door, long after her mother and sister had departed. It was a bittersweet moment, for it felt as though she had finally passed Emmeline into the care of Lord Croxley, letting go of her protective, sisterly duties. The wedding would substantiate it, of course, but this parting felt more poignant. More private.

Cariad put a comforting arm around Frances. “She’s all grown up, eh?”

“When did that happen?” Tears pricked at Frances’ eyes. “I knew she would have to leave one day, but—”

Cariad peered at her sympathetically. “You never truly thought you would be left behind?”

“Yes... I suppose that is the core of it,” Frances agreed quietly, uncomfortable with the realization. She proclaimed, time and again, that all she wanted from life was to be a contented spinster, living

with her dogs in a quaint cottage, where she could while away the days with her books and her walks and her leisurely pursuits. Now, however, that seemed more like a lie she had been telling herself, until she believed it.

Is that why I have become so fond of Andrew? Do I feel, deep down, that he might be my last chance? The prospect terrified her, for it meant she was quickly running out of time.

Standing at the rear of the crowd that had gathered in the entrance hall, Andrew leaned against the nearest wall and stared blankly ahead. He had little interest in such gatherings at the best of times, but this was one ball he could not slink away from.

“I thought you would be standing with your brother.” An unwelcome voice cut through his peaceable boredom, as an equally unwelcome figure sidled up to him. “I suppose you would not want to draw too much attention away from him on a night such as this.”

Andrew glanced down at Rachel. She seemed to be the one who wanted to draw attention, wearing an elaborate gown of vivid red silk. In polite Society, the neckline would have been considered obscene, though she did not appear to care. Nor did many of the gentlemen present, whose eyes flitted not-so-discreetly toward Rachel’s display.

“Where is your chaperone?” Andrew replied curtly.

Come tomorrow, she will be gone, and serenity may resume— He repeated the thought in his mind, already looking forward to watching her carriage retreat from the Manor.

Rachel laughed brashly. “She is somewhere in the midst of this crowd, dear Duke. How courteous of you to show concern.” She fluttered her long eyelashes at him. “I doubt she would notice if you and I were to... make ourselves absent for a short while.”

“Why would I want to do such a thing?” He cringed inwardly, knowing what she was going to say before she said it.

A pleased smile turned up the corners of her reddened, pouting lips. "We have had a stolen moment before, have we not? Do not tell me you have forgotten, or I shall be forced to remind you." She pressed up against his arm, suffocating him with the strong scent of her perfume. "I recall the night clearly. You were wandering alone after your father's funeral, and it began to rain. In my worry for you, I sought to find you. Beneath the trees, I held you, and you—"

"Do not say another word," he interrupted, keeping his voice tense and low. "We have spoken of this before. It was a lapse in judgment. A mistake, never to be repeated."

Undeterred, Rachel traced a fingertip along his forearm. "When I close my eyes, I can still feel your lips on mine. *That* was the true promise, not the arrangement my papa made with yours."

Realizing how great a threat she was, Andrew grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her out of the front door and onto the wide porch, concealing them both behind a wall. Checking that no further carriages were arriving on the driveway, he turned a stern glare toward her.

"I wanted to feel something, Lady Rachel," he muttered, incensed by her presence and the reminder of his mistake. "You could have been anyone. I informed you of that, yet you continue to believe it was some sort of sign of my affections. I have none to give—not to you, not to anyone. Do not dwell upon a fantasy that will never come true."

He would have been lying if he said he did not also remember that night, but not for the same reason as her. Kissing her in his tormented state had been a grave mistake, but it had brought an idea to the forefront of his mind: if he could gain a reputation as a scoundrel and a rake, it would deter any woman from desiring an attachment.

Rachel shook her head slowly. "I do not believe that, dear Duke. I believe you are afraid of your feelings for me, but you have no reason to be." She pressed her palms to his chest, prompting him to step back. "Call me your Duchess, my darling. Announce our engagement tonight. Do not toy with me any longer."

"How many times must I tell you the same thing, before you finally accept it?" He seized her by the arms, holding her away from him.

“You will not be a Duchess unless you wed some other Duke. Desist with this obsession, for your own sake. At present, you have been excluded from the scandal sheets, but if you continue in this manner, you will be ruined.”

She strained against his grip, trying to get closer. “I would risk it all for you, darling Duke.”

“Then you are fool!” he hissed. “Do not make me be cruel, Lady Rachel.”

She grazed her teeth across her bottom lip: her eyes shining with desire. “There is nothing you could say that would feel cruel to me, my dearest. I know this is all a ruse. You wish to test me, to see how worthy I am of your love, and I promise I will overcome every challenge you cast in my direction.”

“There is no test! There is no interest! There is no ruse!” he growled, glancing over the top of her head to make sure they were not being spied upon or eavesdropped upon. “I feel nothing for you, Lady Rachel. Find a gentleman who wants you and stop this nonsense before it destroys your reputation. Your beloved father has taught you to believe that you can have whatever you want, but that is not reality. You cannot have me, nor the counterpart of my title.”

A flicker of doubt passed through her blue eyes. “You promised me.”

“No, I did not,” he retorted. “You have fabricated a lie to the point where you now believe it to be true. I promised nothing. My father might have alluded to an arrangement, but he died before it could be set into motion. As such, I owe you nothing. I am sorry, but you must start believing in the truth. The *actual* truth.”

Rachel relaxed in his grip: her face twisting into a mask of anger. “That arrangement was in place from the moment of your birth, Duke,” she snarled. “My papa and yours agreed upon it. That is confirmation enough.”

“Do you hear yourself?” He tilted his head back in exasperation. “I am thirty years of age, while you are four-and-twenty. How could such an arrangement have been made from the moment of my birth? Are you suggesting our fathers were soothsayers, who could see into the future? Indeed, I imagine your father would have preferred a son, so

what you are saying is impossible!”

Her mouth fell open, as a look of pure confusion moved across her face, twisting and twitching and furrowing with every phase of her thoughts. She could clearly see the logic in Andrew’s words, but it remained to be seen, how staunchly she would stick to the fantasy she had created for herself.

“Well... the arrangement was made from the moment of *my* birth, then!” she insisted, a few moments later. Indeed, Andrew did not know why he had thought she would react any differently. Her determination and bloody mindedness beggared belief.

A sharp, disbelieving laugh choked out of his throat. “You think you would have been the first choice?” He jabbed a finger toward the entrance hall. “If he had not decided to wait, convinced I would attract the daughter of an even wealthier Duke, he would have arranged a betrothal with *this* family, not yours. He would have married both of us—my brother and me—to the daughters of this Manor.”

“Excuse me?” Fury burned in Rachel’s eyes: her mouth contorting into a disgusted grimace.

“Lady Frances would be my wife before you were ever a possibility!” he seethed, hating the scathing tone of his voice. “She is an Earl’s eldest daughter. You are the daughter of a Marquess, and one without much fortune, at that. All those summers you spent at Reeves Hall were a gesture of sympathy, because your father happened to suggest the business endeavor that made my father extraordinarily wealthy. Even if my father were still alive, which I am grateful he is not, he would never have actually agreed to binding me to you!”

I told you not to make me cruel, Rachel! Do not turn me into him for even a moment! He balled his hands into fists, trying to calm himself. This was precisely why he distanced himself from most people, and why he adopted a demeanor of cold dismissal. For when he lost his temper, albeit rarely, it reminded him that he might not be so different from the father he despised.

“Lady *Frances*?!” Rachel appeared as though she might explode: her cheeks purple, her eyes narrowed, her breaths harsh and frantic.

Andrew nodded. "I told you—in the matter of station, she will always be above you. That is, unless you do as I say, and find some other poor soul to harass with your infatuations. There must be countless Earls and a handful of Dukes among the guests tonight. Try your luck with one of them, instead, for I am quite done with you."

At that moment, they were saved from further nastiness by the sound of the Earl of Fernside's voice, making an announcement to the crowd. The loud chatter of the crowd stilled into silence, soothing Andrew's concerns that his conversation with Rachel might have been overheard. He did not care if he ended up in the scandal sheets again, but, despite his dislike for Rachel, he truly did not want to see her reputation in tatters.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I offer my warmest gratitude for your attendance this evening," the Earl said, distracting Rachel for long enough to allow Andrew to hurry past her and dart back into the entrance hall. She lunged for his hand on the way, seeking to pull him back, but she was a jot too slow.

Panting with the strain of such a frustrating discussion, Andrew weaved through the crowd and tucked himself behind a cluster of gentlemen. They paid him little mind, for it was well known that he did not engage with many people at such gatherings.

"Now, it is my delight and my pleasure to introduce my daughter, Lady Emmeline, who is to be married in a fortnight to the wonderful Lord Croxley. Please, raise your glasses to their happy union and join us in belatedly celebrating their betrothal!" The Earl of Fernside gestured to the upper floor, where two curving stairwells led down to a small landing. From there, two more staircases parted, snaking toward the entrance hall. Indeed, the shape of both rather reminded Andrew of an hourglass.

But what time is counting down to? Catching his breath, he thought of what he had said out on the porch: "*Lady Frances would be my wife—*" For a fleeting second, the prospect made him smile. But that smile quickly faded. There would be no wife, not even one he might secretly desire. For he would never let his father win again.

A gasp of admiration whispered through the entrance hall as Lady Emmeline made her grand entrance. A vision in emerald green, Andrew could almost hear the crowd's eyes widening, and sense the

quicken'd beat of countless men's hearts as she made her way down the staircase. Truly, she looked lovely, but Andrew's attentions were elsewhere.

My goodness—

His heart leaped into his throat, his own eyes widening, his mouth drying until he was forced to swallow thickly. Frances had just appeared on the landing of the upper floor, keeping well behind her sister, who was being led by their mother.

In a flowing gown of sapphire blue that rippled like water when she moved, her fiery hair half tamed into a curly mound atop her head, highlighted by a delicate, silver tiara, she looked like an ancient queen. The kind Boudicca would have been proud of. The way she walked commanded the eye to look at her, and though she had not daubed herself in powder or rouge, something seemed different about her face.

She is... so powerful. If someone were to tell me she was Artemis in disguise, I would believe it. He realized why she appeared changed. She exuded confidence in every step, possessing a fearsome pride in her tender smile that took Andrew's breath away. And that confidence and pride, combined with that sweet fondness and sisterly love, made her more beautiful than he had ever seen her.

"That cannot be Lady Frances, can it?" he heard one of the nearby gentlemen whisper. "I heard she was ogre, but she is... rather agreeable."

Another of the gentlemen chuckled. "It is subterfuge, my good man. If you were to see her in the daylight, in an ordinary dress, without those... snakes piled on her head, you would realize the rumors were true."

"Do not look her directly in the eyes, gentlemen, in case she is Medusa incarnate," commented a third gentleman, snickering.

And if those truly were snakes, and she were Medusa herself, she would turn all of you to stone. Andrew clenched his jaw, resisting the urge to chide the men for their remarks. He would not allow them to ruin this moment for her or allow himself to ruin it for her by making a scene.

Slowly, she descended the staircase, looking more majestic with every step. Lady Emmeline had already joined with Peter; the two of them gazing adoringly into one another's eyes as Peter led her through the crowd, down the long hallway, and into the ballroom at the far end. The rest of the crowd followed, leaving Andrew to enjoy the view of Frances in relative privacy.

Their eyes met as she finally reached the entrance hall, now devoid of almost everyone. A handful of people remained, but Andrew did not notice them. He saw only her and found himself being pulled toward her by an unseen force.

"Good evening, Frances," he said softly, taking her hand and bringing it to his lips. The touch of her silken glove cooled his warm lips, though his eyes did not leave hers.

She smiled. "Good evening to you, too."

"You look... extraordinary."

Her gaze dropped with a shyness he had not seen before. "Extraordinarily awkward and ungainly. I feel like Piglet in a costume."

"Not at all. It becomes you." For once, he had the right words to say. "And do not do that, Frances."

She tilted her head up. "Do what?"

"Belittle yourself when faced with a genuine compliment," he replied, keeping hold of her hand. "You do not merely look extraordinary. You *are* extraordinary."

Her eyes widened. "Have you imbibed already?" She waved her free hand in front of his face. "You do not seem inebriated, but perhaps you are good at hiding it."

"I have not touched a drop," he insisted. "Please, just accept my compliment for what it is. I am... fond of your jests, but I am entirely serious."

The shyness returned to her expression. "I am as uncomfortable and

ungainly with kind words as I am in fine clothes. It is not in my nature to know what to do with flattery, for I am unaccustomed to it. Apologies.”

“There is no need to apologize.” He moved his hand to her forearm. “If you are not otherwise inundated, might you consent to dance the next set with me?”

She froze. “Me? Dancing?”

“You do not care to?”

She shook her head, visibly panicked. “I am a terrible dancer, Andrew. You would suffer a grave embarrassment, dancing with me.”

“Allow me to be the judge of that,” he replied, urging her forward, toward the ballroom.

In truth, he was rather ashamed of his own inability to dance, but, maybe together, they would not care for the remarks of others.

Now, I realize what the hourglass represents— The ball marked the start of his final fortnight at Fernside Manor. Once the wedding was done, he would leave, not knowing when he might see her again. And while that would likely be for the best, it would take far longer for him to forget this place, and the woman he had come to admire and adore.

On the one hand, he wanted to make the most of the coming fortnight, spending as much time with Frances as possible. On the other, he feared that doing so might be catastrophic... for what if he reached the end of the fortnight, and found he did not want to leave at all? Or, rather, that he did not want to leave *her*?

Heaven help me, for nothing else will.

He was so invested in his thoughts, and in Frances, that he did not notice the figure standing in the doorway of the main entrance. And though the Manor felt warmer, he blamed it upon the quantity of guests, and not the glower that, unbeknownst to him, burned into his back.

“Might we watch for this set, and dance the next, if you will not be deterred?” Upon reaching the ballroom floor, where couples enthusiastically moved together in a vigorous country dance, Frances immediately had second thoughts.

Andrew smiled reassuringly. “Of course. It might prove to be an excellent reminder of dancing, as I have not partaken in a fair while.” He guided her toward a circular table, draped in a silky white cloth. One of many, that both of them had helped to dress, earlier in the day. “Would you care for some refreshments? I promise I have not yet touched a drop, but it might steady your nerves to have a sip or two of champagne.”

“Yes,” Frances gasped: her heart racing. “Even if it does not, I might become merry enough not to care if I make a misstep or crush your toes. Indeed, some champagne might even trick me into believing I am a tremendous dancer, who has given the grandest performance of her life.”

He chuckled. “I will only be a moment.”

She watched him go, feeling his absence immediately. Walking down the staircase, she had been filled with such love for her sister that the opinions of the guests toward herself, had not even featured in her thoughts. Now, however, she feared their criticism and mockery. After all, she could not toss back witty retorts from the ballroom’s dancing floor, which meant she would be entirely vulnerable.

I must not be an embarrassment to Emmy on this important night. I must continue to dissuade Andrew until there are no sets left to dance. She

settled into a grim determination, concentrating upon the graceful, smiling partners who were dancing about the floor. Emmeline and Lord Croxley were, of course, the center of attention—both evenly matched in their grace and skill. Truly, they seemed made for one another.

However, it was not long before something else stole away her attention. A whimpering, female voice, coming from the terrace beyond the ballroom. It was familiar to Frances and sounded distressed. A masculine voice added a gruff layer, a moment later, and Frances did not like the content one bit.

“You have toyed with me for much too long, Lady Penelope. I have seen the way you look at me in that coquettish manner, though you refuse me at every turn. A gentleman only has so much patience, and mine has worn thin,” the masculine voice growled, with a note of slurring inebriation.

Being closest to the French doors, parted slightly ajar, Frances realized she was likely the only one who could hear the conversation. Everyone else was already invested in the music and the dancing, and no other tables were positioned so near to the outside.

“Leave me be, My Lord,” Penelope’s voice whispered in despair. “You will ruin me.”

The threatening male laughed darkly. “Then you will certainly be mine, for no one else will have you. Now, cease your wriggling so that I may kiss you, and let us hope someone comes out to see us. Then, you will plead with me to announce an engagement, so your reputation can be salvaged.”

“Unhand me!” Penelope pleaded. “If you kiss me, I shall—” The last word turned into a muffled babble of noise, too quiet for anyone else to notice.

In the blink of an eye, Frances leaped out of her seat and raced for the French doors, barreling out of them without hesitation. Her fingertips slipped under her curled tongue, emitting an almighty whistle. The echo of dogs barking responded, and she knew her loyal hounds would not waste a moment in running to her. She had left them in the small study that no one used, with the doors to the gardens left open in case they wished to venture out.

Skidding to a halt, Frances peered into the darkness of the terrace, which had fallen into silence. Her ears pricked for any unusual sounds, but movement caught her attention first. Shadows that did not belong to the gardens, shifting awkwardly through a passageway that led into the concealed realm of the walled garden. The crunch of gravel and the stifled cry of a woman followed, fixing the location of Frances' target.

You are despicable, whoever you are. She did not yet know the identity of the masculine voice, but she had no fear of discovering them. Any apprehension she might have had, had melted away in the pursuit of justice and rescue.

Tearing after the shadows, Frances careened into the walled garden, spotting the perpetrator and his poor victim. The moonlight offered her generous, silvery glow, highlighting the face of a gentleman Frances knew as Lord Lea. A known scoundrel, who filled more pages of the scandal sheets than Andrew. Indeed, she did not know how such a man could have been invited to the ball, in the first place.

Surely, he cannot be a friend of Andrew or Lord Croxley? Perhaps, he received an invitation in the same way that Lady Rachel did.

"Desist!" Frances howled, causing the wretch to pause. He held Penelope in a vise-like grip, one hand over her mouth.

Lord Lea's mouth curled into a scowl. "This is no business of yours, Lady Frances. Return to the ball before you cause my betrothed any further distress. I am only seeking to calm her."

"You are a wretched liar," Frances shot back, smiling at the sound of paws scrabbling on gravel. Sure enough, Piglet and Eris appeared a second later, coming to heel at either side of Frances' legs. In that instant, a sense of eerie composure settled over Frances. Nothing scared her, as long as she had her dogs with her.

Lord Lea eyed the bulldogs in alarm, for they looked far more frightening than they were, especially in the shadow of the night. "What do you intend to do with them, Lady Frances? You are not foolish enough to set your hounds upon me, or you might find the constables come to take them away."

"Not if explanation is given," Frances retorted. "I am certain the

constables would be much more interested in how a lowly, vile Lord made equally vile advances toward a defenseless young woman. She refused you, Lord Lea. That should have been indication enough that you ought to take your affections elsewhere.”

Lord Lea stumbled backward, with Penelope still in his tight embrace. Her eyes glistened with tears, her pinned arms straining and struggling against her kidnapper’s grasp. “She is to be my betrothed. The constables will take my word over yours.”

“Not in this part of the country, Lord Lea.” Frances took a few steps forward, her dogs matching her pace. “I am well acquainted with the local constables, as well as the Magistrate. You are not in London anymore, where you might do as you please without fear of a reckoning.”

Her words appeared to give the vulgar Lord pause for thought, his gaze darting between Frances and Penelope. Perhaps, he thought he could ask for Frances’ silence, if he released Penelope. But Frances had no intention of letting him get away with this awful act, for if there was no retribution, he would only do it again.

“You would stir up trouble because a betrothed pair sought to steal a private moment together? I imagine these gardens are filled with couples, doing the same,” Lord Lea argued, apparently determined to lie his way to freedom.

Frances put her fingers to her lips and gave another sharp whistle. Immediately, her dogs flew away from her, charging full pelt at Lord Lea. They were not actually going to attack, but merely give the impression that they were. Nine occasions out of ten, the deterrent worked, and Frances hoped this would not be the exception. Above most things, she feared any harm coming to her dear pets.

“Call them off!” Lord Lea pushed Penelope forward, as if to sacrifice her in his place. “I will desist!” The profound panic in his voice might have made Frances smile, if her concentration had not been upon Penelope. The poor girl had fallen and did not seem able to get up.

Steeling her nerves, Frances marched toward the wretched scene and crouched to help Penelope to her feet. Meanwhile, the dogs were barking loudly at Lord Lea, keeping him trapped against a hedge of boxwoods. Another passageway, not far to Lord Lea’s right, would

give him access to the lawns, and Frances did not want him escaping so easily.

“Are you well? Can you walk?” Frances asked hurriedly, keeping one eye on the Lord. “Shall I call for assistance?”

Penelope shook her head effusively. “No, Frances. I can walk. Do not send for anyone. I would not have anyone watch this humiliation or know of it.”

“Return to the Manor. Find His Grace, the Duke of Reeves, and inform him of what has occurred and that I have asked him to aid you. He will not tell another soul, but he will see to it that you are taken care of,” Frances urged, praying she was right to put such faith in Andrew.

Penelope hesitated. “Are you quite certain he will not tell anyone?”

“I am,” Frances replied, suddenly sure.

“Th... thank you, F... Frances,” the poor woman stammered, before limping away across the walled garden and disappearing through the passage. Looking as she did, Frances did not know if Penelope would make it to Andrew without someone else asking what had happened, but that was not in her hands, now.

Whirling around to confront Lord Lea, she cursed under her breath as she saw him darting through the nearside passageway, making a bid for freedom.

“Come on,” Frances instructed her dogs, as she chased after the wretch. No matter what, he would feel her wrath tonight. He was only making it harder on himself.

Settling into her long, powerful strides as she sprinted across the lawns, the bulldogs charged on ahead of her. Giving a high-pitched whistle, they sped up further, until they had caught up to Lord Lea. With the dogs nipping at his heels, the cretin attempted to keep running, but the darkness and a hidden dip in the lawns put a swift end to his escape.

He sprawled forward, hitting the grass with a thud that urged a pained wheeze out of his chest. The dogs, meanwhile, pressed their torsos flat to the ground, growling and snarling at the wretch. They

would not attack, but Lord Lea did not know that.

A few moments later, Frances reached him, just as he was gingerly maneuvering into a sitting position: his eyes flickering between the bulldogs.

Barely out of breath, Frances puffed out her chest and leveled the Lord with a disgusted stare. “Do you possess a single speck of decency, Lord Lea? Indeed, it is ironic that that should be your name, for there is nothing “lordly” about you.” She clicked her tongue. “Only a coward would choose the weakest prey, but I am not surprised to find that you are just such a coward.”

“I have loved her since I was in my youth!” Lord Lea protested, though that clearly could not be true.

“Do not make yourself any more pathetic by telling outlandish lies. You are eight-and-thirty, she is barely two-and-twenty. Your youth was almost over before she was even born.” Frances seethed at him, wishing she had the nerve to punch him. “I know of you, Lord Lea. Everyone does. If you think you will be believed, you are sorely mistaken.”

Lord Lea put up his hands, staring at the bulldogs that continued to bark and snarl him. “What do you intend to do? If you breathe a word of this, my reputation will recover, but Lady Penelope’s will not. Especially if I feed tales to the scandal sheets about her.” He smirked. “Be cautious, Lady Frances, or you truly will ruin her.”

It irritated Frances beyond comprehension that his words held truth within them. She had lost count of the poor young ladies who were dragged through the dirt by scoundrels such as this man and were spurned and ignored and called all sorts of insults when they tried to profess their innocence. A man could do whatever he liked with minimal impact. A woman held one conversation, standing too closely with a gentleman, and she became unmarriageable.

And everyone wonders why I do not care for the institution—

“There is nothing I can do tonight, Lord Lea,” she said confidently, still conscious of not destroying her sister’s betrothal party. “That being said, if I hear a single whisper of you behaving in this fashion again, or I see a single paragraph about Penelope in the scandal

sheets, I will find you and I will bring my dogs. And next time, I will give the command for them to bite with impunity.”

Lord Lea visibly balked at the threat, for the constant barking of the bulldogs tended to be an unnerving sound, especially if they were in close proximity. “Very well, very well!” He gulped loudly. “If you allow me to depart, you will not see her name in any scandal sheets, and I will leave her be.”

“Do you consider me a fool, Lord Lea?” She scoffed. “You will accompany me back into the Manor—using a different entrance, of course—and I will require your written confirmation of keeping this promise. A contract, of sorts, to ensure your good behavior in the future.”

The Lord narrowed his eyes. “If I consent, you will call away your hounds? Why does a lady even have such hounds? You would fare much better with a pug or a—”

“If I had a Pomeranian, Lord Lea, it would have torn you to shreds by now. They might seem sweet, but they have a savage temperament, especially when their young ladies are threatened,” Frances interrupted, gesturing in the general direction of the Manor. “Now, if you would follow me, I can instruct my dogs to leave you alone. If only you knew such a command, none of this would be happening.”

Lord Lea slowly got to his feet, and a call from Frances drew the bulldogs back to her sides. Still, Lord Lea was likely aware that he would be chased again, if he tried to run.

Frances was about to turn toward the Manor, when a delighted cackle from the Lord made her halt.

“Oh dear, Lady Frances. It seems you will not get your contract tonight,” he said slyly, nodding at the Manor. “Not unless you wish to parade Lady Penelope’s transgressions in front of every guest present.”

Slowly, Frances looked in the direction of the ballroom’s French doors. The entire ball had gathered, and were staring out with a mixture of confusion, amusement, shock, and disapproval. And as Frances found Emmeline’s face in the crowd, her heart sank.

I am sorry, Sister. It seemed she was always bound to ruin this precious

night. Good intentions did not matter when the gossip would spread like wildfire, singeing Emmeline and Lord Croxley in the process.

Andrew, who had spent the last ten minutes tending to a distraught and tearful Lady Penelope, fought his way through the crowd to see what all the fuss was about. He could guess, but he wanted to be sure.

“How obscene she is,” someone muttered as he pushed to the front. “Lady Georgina is claiming that she saw Lady Frances trip him and throw him to the ground. She is a disgrace to the sanctity of womanhood.”

Andrew ignored the remark as he reached the French doors and saw, with his own eyes, what the kerfuffle was. A chastened Frances walked slowly across the lawns, with her dogs at her heels, while Lord Lea strode proudly behind her. He might have looked more imposing if he was not smothered in mud and grass stains.

What the devil is that creature doing here? Although they shared pages in the scandal sheets, Andrew despised gentlemen such as Lord Lea. They were cretins who deliberately sought to destroy women’s reputations for their own pleasure, rather than fabricating stories to protect themselves from marriage.

Without thinking, Andrew slipped out of the Manor and hurried toward Frances, much to the intrigue of the crowd. A few gasps echoed behind him, but he paid them no heed.

“Are you well? Are you hurt?” He very nearly lifted his hands to cradle her face but remembered his audience at the last moment. “What happened? I could not garner much from Lady Penelope, but she is presently with my mother.”

Frances eyed him mournfully. "I made a fool of myself, and of my sister." Her gaze dropped. "And he will walk away from this without any consequences whatsoever."

"Did he... harm you?" Rage bubbled within him at the very notion, but he held the flood of anger back. If he heard confirmation of his worst fears, *then* he would unleash it all upon Lord Lea.

Frances shook her head. "He would not have dared with Piglet and Eris protecting me," she explained, before swiftly whispering the details of her plan to have Lord Lea sign a binding contract. "That cannot be done with everyone watching. At least no one will think anything untoward has occurred between me and Lord Lea, so I am not concerned for my reputation. That is one benefit, I suppose, of looking as I do."

"Leave it with me," Andrew insisted, wanting to help. He could not bear the defeated look in her eyes, nor the sorrowful slump of her shoulders, as if all her vitality had been drained from her.

She glanced up. "What?"

"I will make him sign such a contract. It is high time he was held accountable," Andrew replied determinedly. "Return to the ballroom and I will find you as soon as it is done. In the meantime, you ought to explain everything to your sister. She will not hold any ill will toward you once she understands."

Frances nodded wearily. "You will truly do such a thing?"

"I promise." His fingertips itched to touch her face, or pull her into his arms, to offer some comfort. Yet, he would not add fuel to this particular fire.

A sad smile graced her lips. "Thank you. If you venture along the terrace, you will find the door to a study. It will be open, as that is where the dogs usually reside at gatherings." She paused to scratch and stroke the darling bulldogs. "You should take them with you. They will follow."

"Of course," he agreed, knowing they might be useful in wrangling Lord Lea.

With instruction given, Andrew headed straight for Lord Lea and seized the wretch by the arm. The Lord looked alarmed for a moment, and tried to wrench his arm back, but Andrew was far stronger and definitively more determined.

“Be silent, and do as you are told,” Andrew hissed. “You have caused enough trouble this night, and you will not continue. Now, come with me in a peaceable fashion, or you might find that, tomorrow, a letter is sent to your father. I am sure he would be intrigued to hear what the Duke of Reeves has to say about his son.”

Lord Lea paled. “Please... do not, I beg of you.”

“That shall be entirely up to you, and your behavior,” Andrew replied, tugging the vile fellow toward the study that Frances had indicated.

The sooner I have your signature, the sooner I might return to Frances, and see her smile and her vigor resumed before the night is over. As he walked quickly, he could still feel the itch of longing in his hands, and how warm and wonderful she might have felt in his arms, if he had only had the courage to embrace her.



Alone on the periphery of the ballroom, a pariah to the guests, Frances fought against the constant tide of tears that threatened to fall. Emmeline had disappeared by the time Frances got back inside, and though Frances had desired to find her, her mother had warned her against it.

“You have done enough, Darling,” she had said, in a tone of sympathetic disappointment. “Leave her awhile and speak to her when she desires to find you, instead.”

Frances would have retired to her own chambers, to avoid the stares and whispers of the revelers, but she needed to know that Andrew had kept to his promise. If she went to her chambers, he would not be able to inform her of what had happened, for he was not permitted in her wing of the Manor.

He would likely do it anyway, and knock upon my door, but I think I have caused plenty of scandal for one evening. Solemnly, she picked at the silver hem of her capped sleeves, wishing the gown was not so

beautiful. It all seemed wasted now.

“Look at the audacity of her,” a smug, whiney voice grated into Frances’ realm of concentration. “You would expect her to have the decency to remove herself from the ball. I have never encountered anyone so shameless. Goodness, her poor sister.”

Frances did not need to look to know who it was. Indeed, Lady Rachel had likely been waiting for Frances to make a mistake, so she could once again declare how vulgar and inferior she thought Frances was. Revenge for the mockery Frances had made of Rachel during their first meeting.

Though you made a fool of yourself first, in disbelieving my words and treating me like a flea-ridden stray. Ordinarily, Frances would have retorted with something of that ilk, but her heart was not in the mood for repartee. She would have preferred the night to sweep in through the windows and shroud her in darkness, so she would not have to be the center of their mockery.

Another lady, who Frances vaguely knew to be Lady Georgiana, snickered coldly. “Did you see the way she hurled herself at Lord Lea, sending him crashing to the ground? How absolutely abhorrent! What sort of lady is she? I am starting to believe the rumors that she is no lady at all, but a secret... abomination.”

“If she looks like a bull, it should not be surprising that she acts like one,” Lady Rachel announced, cackling with cruel delight. “I am more surprised that her hideous gown has not exploded at the seams. Shipwrights ought to make sails out of whatever fabric her dress is made of, for it will never rip, even in the most terrible of storms.”

Frances stared down into her lap: her cheeks fearsomely hot with humiliation. It had been years since she had truly allowed the insults of petty girls to penetrate the armored shell that she had created for herself, but she had not forgotten the pain of it. It stung like she was shuffling slowly through an entire field of nettles, with no dock leaves nearby to soothe the throbbing burn.

“And did you note those disgusting beasts she had with her?” Lady Rachel continued sourly. “They do say that pets look like their owners. I never thought it was true until today. Why, for a moment, I was convinced there were three bulldogs out there on the lawn.”

The two other ladies who stood with Rachel—Lady Georgiana and another lady, who Frances did not know—burst into raucous laughter, clapping their hands to their chests and fanning themselves in wretched satisfaction.

The unknown friend glared in Frances' direction. "She must be quite mad. I expect we will discover in the week's news that she has been sent to an asylum."

"I wholly agree, Harriet," Lady Rachel replied, giving some identity to the third woman. "I have read of phantoms and possessions in some rather eerie novels, but I have never seen it in real life. She was like a monster, screaming at and chasing poor Lord Lea."

Poor Lord Lea?! You would not be saying that if you were the one who had been snatched away by him. Frances' nostrils flared, her fingernails digging into her palms as she curled her hands into fists. No retaliation could be given for their unkind remarks, for Emmeline's sake.

The lady named Harriet made a show of looking around the ballroom, which had mostly returned to normal. "Where is Lord Lea?"

"My darling Duke took him away. Did you not see? I imagine he wanted to calm the situation and remove Lord Lea from that vicious harpy. He has a generous spirit, in that regard," Lady Rachel replied proudly. "They are probably imbibing good brandy and laughing about the entire mess."

Frances' insides writhed in exasperation and uncertainty. Andrew had seemed so very genuine and caring when he had run out to meet her before. Not once had she doubted his intentions for taking Lord Lea away, but her mind swirled with chaos, and all the things that should have made sense were distorted by a fog of self-pity.

"What of Lady Penelope?" Lady Georgiana chimed in. "I have not seen her in a good while. Do you think she has retired early? I heard tell that she was of a sickly disposition, and she did appear rather pale when I saw her before."

Lady Rachel nodded firmly, as if she knew everything. "She always does. Whenever we venture out together in London or Bath, she is forever tugging upon my arm, begging me to leave with her. A light

breeze could blow that poor, fragile thing over. Her mother and father must despair of her, for she will never find a husband in that shriveled, weakly state.”

“I heard some gossip that Lord Lea had courting intentions toward her,” Lady Harriet whispered, like this was part of the conversation that Frances was not supposed to hear.

Lady Rachel scoffed. “Nonsense. He would not choose such a dismal creature.” Frances could feel the woman’s stare, searing her skin. “You do not think that was why Lady Frances and Lord Lea were out in the gardens alone, do you?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Lady Georgiana replied.

“Perhaps, it was a lovers’ tiff. There are many gentlemen in this world with peculiar tastes, and we all know that Lord Lea likes to sample every kind of lady—if the scandal sheets are to be believed, that is.” Lady Rachel snorted out a harsh laugh. “Maybe, he had indulged in a tryst with Lady Frances, and when he desired to put an end to it, she sought to pummel him into dust.”

Harriet screeched so loud it drew a few cold glares from other guests, forcing her to hide her mouth behind clamped hands. “How wicked you are, Lady Rachel! Even a gentleman with peculiar tastes would not lower himself to being involved with a toad like Lady Frances.”

“It is far more likely that Lord Lea sought an “indulgence” with Lady Emmeline, and Lady Frances became jealous,” Lady Georgiana surmised, clearly oblivious to the fact that she could not have been more wrong. “She is probably already furious that her younger, far more beautiful sister has married before her, and to a Duke’s son, no less.”

Lady Rachel made a noise of agreement. “She has already attempted to sink her claws into *my* Duke. You should have seen the way she preened and cooed and fawned over him, upon my arrival. Why, she all but grabbed his arm when he did not offer it to escort her inside.”

“She did not!” Harriet squealed in horror. “With *your* Duke? How despicable she is!”

Lady Rachel nodded. “She did, I assure you. She has made every

excuse to try and cross his path while I have been here. Earlier today, I found her blocking his way. It is truly pathetic.” She snickered. “Then again, she must be desperate. She is of an age where no gentleman of merit would want her, and it is not as though she has any redeeming qualities that might make a gentleman overlook her advancing years.”

“Goodness, how right you are,” Lady Georgiana agreed. “She thinks she is the height of wit and hilarity, but when she makes one of her unsavory jests, I look at the faces of other guests, and not one of them is laughing or even smiling. If they do, it is merely out of pity because she is so unfortunate to look at. It is the same at every ball I attend, where that troglodyte has somehow scraped an invitation.”

Of all the things those vile girls could have said, picking at her sense of humor struck the most agonizing blow. For most of Frances’ life, it was all she had to rely on. Now, to hear that no one appreciated it, and any smile or chuckle were given in pity, Frances felt the foundations of her world crumbling beneath her feet.

“The family would do well to disown her,” Harriet added bitterly. “They have one tremendously beautiful daughter, who will soon be a wife. What need do they have for a... spare who is of no use to anyone? A lifelong spinster is nothing but a drain on a household. Like old vegetable peelings, it would be best if they threw her onto the ash pile.”

Slowly, Frances got to her feet. She could feel the nasty ladies watching her, no doubt proud that they had been so unkind that she could no longer bear the torment of their words. But she would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her flee like a devastated damsel. Even in her defeat, she was determined to maintain some kind of dignity. At least, the tiny speck she had left after the utter mortification of the whole evening.

Walking out of the French doors, she did not whistle for Piglet and Eris. They did not need to share in her shame, and where she was planning to go, she did not want anyone to find her. Perhaps ever.

Thunder boomed in the distance, while forks of vivid lightning pierced the gloomy night's sky, further darkened by the stampede of brooding clouds that rolled in. The storm had taken everyone by surprise, for it had come out of nowhere, but Andrew would not have cared if it was raining kittens. He had one concern, and one alone.

"Where is she?" He grabbed his brother by the shoulder, whirling Peter around.

Peter frowned. "Who?"

"Frances. Where is she?" Andrew looked to Lady Emmeline, who stood at Peter's side. The pair had just returned from tending to Lady Penelope, taking over from Peter and Andrew's mother, who had grown too tired to continue.

Lady Emmeline's eyes widened to the whites. "Whatever do you mean? I thought she was with you, taking care of that atrocious beast?" She shook her head bitterly. "I cannot believe such a slimy rat was permitted into this Manor. I will not blame the footmen for not checking his invitation, but if neither I nor Peter sent him one, he must have used subterfuge."

"She came back inside to talk to you!" Andrew urged, growing more frantic by the moment. The rain drumming upon the windows did little to comfort him, for if he knew anything about Frances—and he liked to think he knew more than he had done when he had first arrived—she would seek solace in the forests and hills she adored so much.

Lady Emmeline turned ashen. “No, that cannot be! I would have seen her. I would have spoken to her. Surely, she must know that I am not angry with her?” She paused. “Oh goodness... I caught her gaze while she was out upon the lawns. I must have looked so terribly disappointed, but I did not understand the situation, then!”

“You did not see her come back inside?” Andrew tried to keep to the important points. Lady Emmeline could worry about her initial reaction later, once he was certain that Frances was all right.

Lady Emmeline gave the faintest shake of her head. “I went to the refreshments table with Peter. That is when your mother found us and asked us to help her with Penelope.” Her voice cracked. “Franny must have thought I did not want to be near her! Oh no, this is terrible! Peter, I should have sent you to tell her that all was well! Why did I not think of how things must look to her?”

“All *will* be well,” Peter assured, putting an arm around Lady Emmeline’s shoulders. A bold gesture, considering there were still guests milling about, though most had retired to their chambers or retreated to the drawing rooms and music rooms that were open for their enjoyment. With a storm as wild as the one raging outside, no one would be leaving tonight.

With the exception of you, Lord Lea. The disgusting scoundrel had been forced back into his carriage by Andrew’s own hand, after the contract of good behavior and staunch silence had been signed. Andrew had even followed the carriage to the front gates, informing the guards not to let it back onto the Estate, under any circumstances.

He ran an anxious hand through his dark locks. “I do not know that it will, Brother.” He did not wish to cause Lady Emmeline further distress, but certain factors needed to be taken into account. “Piglet and Eris are still in the study.”

“Pardon?” Peter furrowed his brow, evidently not understanding the weight of that information.

Lady Emmeline, on the other hand— “Then she must still be in the Manor, must she not? She would never go anywhere without those two.” She sounded as dubious as Andrew felt. “We must fetch them! They will find her far quicker than any of us.”

“You are quite right.” Andrew did not waste a moment in breaking into a sprint, tearing along the maze of hallways that he had already traversed once that night. Footsteps pounded behind him, letting him know that Lady Emmeline and Peter were in pursuit.

Upon reaching the study, the two bulldogs, resting by the roaring fireplace, peered up at Andrew with mournful eyes. Even someone who was not used to the hounds would have known, immediately, that they were out of sorts.

“Where is she?” Andrew hurried to the dogs and knelt beside them, ruffling their fur. “Can you find her?”

Peter harrumphed from the doorway. “They are animals, Brother. They cannot understand you.”

“You would be surprised,” Lady Emmeline replied nervously, running to join Andrew on the floor. There, she glanced around the small, mahogany paneled room, looking for something.

Visibly curious, Peter edged further into the study. “Do you think she might have left a note? Of course, we are all privy to the reason she behaved in such a way with Lord Lea, but *she* is not privy to our knowledge. She might feel she has disgraced herself and has taken herself away from the Manor. It would not be the first time a shamed lady has fled.”

“Do not say that!” Lady Emmeline cried, reaching for a shawl that had been draped over the back of a leather armchair. “She has not fled. She would not. This is all an awful misunderstanding which will soon be resolved.”

Discreetly, Andrew observed his brother, wondering how Peter would contend with this slight disagreement. There could be no surer sign of how a marriage would proceed than seeing how they dealt with small quarrels.

Peter knelt beside Lady Emmeline, lifting his hands to cradle her face as Andrew wished he had cradled Frances’ face. “It will, My Love. Wherever your sister might be, within the Manor or without, I will not rest until she is found. I am sorry for upsetting you when you must already be at your wit’s end.”

"I cannot bear the idea that she thinks I am furious with her," Lady Emmeline admitted, pressing her cheek into Peter's palm. "She is forever fearful of embarrassing me, though she has never done so in her entire life. My mother and father, bless their souls, have always made her believe that she will do something or say something that will thwart my chance of happiness. I never contemplated the true effect it must have had on her, for she makes it seem as though nothing can bother her."

Andrew smiled sadly. "I can testify to that. Now, what do you plan to do with that shawl? Are Piglet and Eris trained in tracking scents?"

"My sister has attempted to instruct them, but Piglet is the only one who ever has any luck," Lady Emmeline replied, wafting the shawl underneath Piglet's nose, so the bulldog could get a hearty sniff of the fabric.

His tail began wagging immediately, which, in turn, set Eris' tail wagging. With a resolute bark, Piglet ambled toward the far doors, which opened onto the terrace. Andrew had left them ajar once he had dragged Lord Lea back across the lawns, skirting around the entire Manor until they got to the driveway.

"In case he has caught an old scent, you should search the Manor," Andrew instructed, looking at Lady Emmeline. "Peter, you ought to help her."

Peter nodded slowly. "What will you do? Gather a search party?"

"There is no time for that," Andrew replied gravely, as he jumped to his feet. "This storm will not relent for a while, and though the rain is somewhat warm, a chill will soon set in if Frances is out there. I have no doubt that she can find shelter for herself, but the truth is... she might not want to."

Lady Emmeline cringed, wrapping her arms around herself. "Find her, Your Grace. I beg of you, find her."

"I will do all I can," Andrew promised. "Peter, take care of Lady Emmeline, and ensure that Lady Penelope is also in better spirits. If I have not returned by dawn, then you may send a search party after me."

Peter looked like he was about to argue, but Lady Emmeline's desperate hold upon him made his mouth close again. Instead, he simply offered a reluctant nod, though there was no mistaking his fear. The Fernside Estate was still relatively unknown to Andrew, and even he doubted his safety out there. After all, there might be another hidden hole that one wrong step would see him tumble into, possibly to an early grave.

But in your sadness, dear Frances, you might also make a wrong step. You saved me once... now, it is my turn to repay the favor, no matter the cost.

Taking a deep breath, he charged out into the shadowed, drenched gardens, keeping his eyes fixed on the white coat of Piglet. Indeed, the dog looked almost ghostly in the darkness, and Andrew prayed that was not a terrible omen.

“F rances? Frances, where are you? Frances, if you can hear

my voice, please call out!” Andrew cupped his hands around his mouth and bellowed into the impenetrable dark of the forest. The steady patter of rainfall clamored in his ears, making him uncertain as to whether Frances would be able to hear him, even if she were close by.

For what seemed like an eternity, he had followed Piglet through the undergrowth, weaving past towering trees... and bumping into a great many, too. Now and again, the bulldog disappeared, bringing a lurch of panic to Andrew’s heart. He had tried to whistle, as he had seen Frances do, but it lacked the volume. Still, thus far, Piglet had continued to return for his dutiful follower, when he had gone too far ahead.

“I do not mean to sound ungrateful, Eris, but it is fortunate you are not the one gifted in scents,” Andrew mumbled down at the darker-colored bulldog, who had not left his side for even a moment.

Eris whimpered at him, but she did not sound insulted. Merely sad that they had not yet found Frances. In truth, if humans acted the same way as dogs, Andrew would have been whimpering, too.

“We will find her,” he promised the dog, as he paused to rub some life back into his cold and weary legs. As he had suspected, within the gloom of the forest, the rain lost any of its summer warmth, making the skin prickle into gooseflesh and the teeth chatter against the chill.

Piglet crashed back through the shrubs and bushes, appearing like a grisly, slobbering phantom. The bulldog came to a clumsy halt in front

of Andrew's legs and emitted a short, hopeful bark.

"Can you smell her through all this, Piglet?" Andrew crouched to stroke the soaked hound, worried that the poor thing might be mistaking the tempting aroma of rabbits and hedgehogs with the scent of Frances.

Not that she smells unpleasant, or at all like a woodland creature. He tried to conjure her scent, recalling fresh aromas of pine needles and lavender, with a hint of flowery soap.

Piglet thumped his tail on the ground and whipped around, resuming his pursuit through the dripping, sodden woodland. Andrew's tailcoat, shirt, and waistcoat no longer remembered what it was like to be dry, and nor did he. Water fogged his vision and trickled down his face, only to be replaced in seconds whenever he tried to wipe the moisture away.

Hurrying after the white dog and grimacing through the ache in his stiffened thighs, Andrew lacked the faintest idea of where he was. Piglet had taken the western trail to begin with, but they could have diverged from that long ago, as there had not been a discernible path for a very long time.

"Frances? Frances, can you hear me? Frances!" he shouted relentlessly, willing her face to appear in the hollow of an ancient oak, or down from a sheltered bough, or from within a forest cave. He did not care if it frightened the life out of him. He just wanted to see her again.

After what felt to his bones and muscles and burning breath like a second eternity, Andrew came to an abrupt halt. Up ahead, Piglet had flopped to the wet ground, whining in the back of his throat at something in the bushes.

"What is it, Piglet?" Andrew whispered, urging his feet to move forward. He crouched down beside the melancholy beast and followed his line of sight.

On closer inspection, the bushes were not ordinary. Indeed, they were not bushes at all, but a series of bent twigs and saplings and pliant branches that had been fashioned into a rudimentary dome. That had then been covered in frond after frond of closely packed leaves, or so

it appeared.

“Frances?” Andrew called out.

The sound of something stirring inside the shelter made his heart jolt in hope. A rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs heralded the appearance of a deathly pale figure, shuffling out of a small hole in the leafy dome.

“Frances!” At the same time, Andrew, Piglet, and Eris all surged toward her. Andrew got there first, pulling the frozen, shaking figure into his arms and holding her tight, though that did not stop Piglet and Eris from leaping up at their mistress, trying to lick some warmth back into her ice-cold face.

“You... are... soaked to the... s... skin,” Frances whispered, burying her face into his neck. “You should... n... not be out h... here. It is n... not... safe.”

Andrew held her tighter. “And you should not be concerned for my welfare, when you are out here all alone, without your dogs for company.” Instinctively, he pressed his lips to her soaking wet hair, inhaling the earthy, woody, rainy scent of her. “What were you thinking, Frances? Why would you do such a thing?”

Her arms slipped around him, pulling him even closer for warmth. “Is it n... not... obvious?” she stammered: her teeth chattering from the cold. “Perhaps it... is n... not.”

“Your sister is not angry with you, my dear Frances. Indeed, she is distraught, fearing for your life,” he told her, leaning his head over hers to try and keep the rain off her. “There has been a misunderstanding, you see. My mother intercepted Lady Emmeline, to take over guardianship of Lady Penelope. As such, your sister did not return to the ballroom as she intended to, and could not tell you that she was not angry.”

Frances crawled onto his lap, huddling into him. “Y... You are kind... to l... lie, Andrew, but I saw... the way she... l... looked at me. I shamed her. I have... shamed m... my entire family, and the worst part is, Lord L... Lea deserved it.”

“They know,” Andrew assured. “Lady Penelope told them everything.

Yes, your sister might have been dismayed, to begin with, but that has all been remedied. She does not blame you for what you did. Rather, she would like to celebrate your bravery, as I would. There are not many people who would have confronted Lord Lea like that, much less attempt a daring rescue of a defenseless young lady.”

Frances peered up at him, looking so small and sad that it nearly broke Andrew’s heart. “Is that... the t... ruth?”

“It is, dear Frances,” he confirmed. “Nothing can be done about the gossip that will, no doubt, circulate once the guests depart, but neither your sister nor my brother care what anyone has to say. They know what really happened, as does Lady Penelope, my mother, and myself. We are in awe of you, and that is all that matters.”

Shaking violently, Frances drew back slightly. “That is not... the only r... reason... I ran away.”

“It is not?” He frowned in confusion. What other reason could there be?

She swallowed loudly. “I w... was waiting for... y... you in the ballroom. Lady R... Rachel and two of her... foul m... minions decided to talk about me, where I would... be sure to h... hear them,” she explained, shuddering in his arms. “They s... said such awful things, Andrew, and... I c... could not d... drown them out. I l... let them get the... b... better of me.”

“Lady Rachel?” Andrew’s eyes narrowed with bristling anger. Rachel’s spoiled and petulant nature held a spark of danger at its core, but her actions could well have killed somebody that night. Namely, the woman Andrew adored.

Frances nodded. “I should n... not have let them w... win, but... my m... mind was already in turmoil. Being out here, I have h... had time... to think, and I know... they were being cruel for... cruelty’s sake.” Her breath hitched. “But I must know one thing—are y... you *her* Duke? Have you ever b... been *her* Duke? She speaks as if you have shared something, and I... w... would know what, even if I d... do not actually w... want to hear it.”

“It is all nonsense, Frances,” he urged, wrapping her up as tightly as he dared without the risk of crushing her. “She believes I was

promised to her, but no such promise was made. She also believes she is owed the title of Duchess, because her father's business suggestion made my father exceedingly wealthy. Of course, that is circumstantial, and my father gave hers a commission of sorts. All that was owed has been paid."

A sorrowful expression crumpled her face. "So, you are not her Duke?"

"No, dear Frances. I am not, nor ever shall be."

She flung her arms around his neck, pressing her tearful face into his shoulder. Her hand slipped through the hair at his nape, bringing his head closer to her, and he did not resist as he settled his chin at the curve that joined her throat and shoulder. It brought his lips agonizingly close to the rain slick, bare skin of her neck, prompting him to close his eyes to remove the temptation of kissing her.

"You do not know how r... relieved I am to h... hear you say that," she murmured, her lips moving against his shoulder. It was not quite a kiss, but, somehow, it felt even more powerful, stirring the warmth in his heart and stoking the ember of affection that he had tried to pretend was not there.

He smiled, allowing the curve of it to lightly grace her neck. "Lady Rachel is, and has always been, a wretched little creature. Her father has never refused her anything, so she believes she can have whatever she desires. For years, she has plagued me, demanding that I marry her. I would not oblige her, if there were a pistol to my head."

"Careful," Frances warned, chuckling thinly. "You would not want to give her any violent notions."

He feigned a cringe. "Quite right, I would not." His expression softened into a smile, and he finally lifted his hand to her face, lightly brushing her cheek with his thumb. "You are frozen, My Dear. We ought to get you back to the Manor as soon as possible. I daresay Miss Eris and Master Piglet are in firm agreement."

"What did you call me?" A small gasp slipped between her lips.

Digging into his own courage, he cradled her face in his hands. "I called you, "My Dear," because you are." He took a breath. "You have

become so *very* dear to me, Frances. I finally admitted it to myself the precise moment I thought something awful might have happened to you. A world without you in it would be a far grayer and more dismal place.”

“Have I s... succumbed to the cold?” she murmured in shock. “Am I imagining you saying these things? When I awaken tomorrow, *if* I awaken, w... will I remind you of this and d... discover that y... you said nothing of the sort?”

Andrew chuckled. “You *will* awaken tomorrow, and I will repeat exactly what I have just said, so you can be in no doubt about my affections toward you.”

“Goodness, ‘affections’. This is all moving rather swiftly, Andrew. Next, you will be leaning your face closer to mine and—” She did not get to finish her sentence, for his lips stole away her words.

In baring his soul to her, in a way that frightened and invigorated him in equal measure, he could not resist the pull of his longing. As she had not balked at his confession, he hoped she would not hate him or chastise him for his brazen kiss. Indeed, he prayed that she wanted to kiss him return.

A moment later, he received his answer, as her lips moved against his. Slow and tentative and uncertain, but responsive. Meanwhile, her arms looped more tightly about his neck, as his arms brought her as close as possible to his chest. It thrilled him, to hold such a remarkable woman in his embrace, and to know that his affections were returned. Never in his life had he expected to feel such an intense adoration for someone, nor had he known that such a sensation could be so overwhelmingly wonderful.

Frances broke the kiss suddenly, gazing into his eyes with a look of distinct worry. “I do not want to be another name in the scandal sheets, Andrew. If you are toying with me, then you must say so.”

“I am not,” he promised. “I could not, with you.”

A nervous smile coaxed her lips into half a curve. “And if I am atrocious in the art of kissing, you must *not* tell me. My pride, at present, would not be able to endure such a blow.”

“You are wonderful,” he said, tilting his head to kiss her again. But she pulled her head back before their lips could touch, evidently not finished with her line of worried questioning.

“How many of those stories in the scandal sheets are true—are some, at least, just rumors and nothing more?” She turned her face away slightly, unable to meet his eye.

He sighed, feeling as though a great weight was about to be lifted. “All are rumors, and nothing more.” He paused. “Have you ever noticed that the names within the stories of me are never full names, but only initials?”

Frances nodded stiffly.

“I am the gossipmonger who sends the tawdry tales to the writers of the scandal sheets,” he explained, smiling at the ridiculousness of it all. “A few were orchestrated between me and a handful of young ladies who wished for their reputations to be ruined, so they would not have to marry the gentlemen they were betrothed to. Most of them are happily married to commoners now, so it worked out rather well.”

A stunned gasp whispered through the drumming of the raindrops. “It was all a ruse? But why?”

“To protect myself,” he replied without hesitation. “After all, who would want to marry their daughter to a known scoundrel?”

Her brow furrowed in consternation. “I am not sure I believe you. Had you not kissed me, I might have done, but you must have some experience of clandestine encounters if you kiss as well as you—”

He silenced her playfully with another kiss, pressing his lips to hers with a greater ease of passion. Catching her mouth in a slow, delicious rhythm, he smiled against her kiss as he felt her echo the motion. He had some knowledge of how to kiss, and kiss well, but guiding her through her first experience made it feel like his first time, all over again: the wondrous nerves, the bursting sparks of excitement, the desire to feel their confidence in one another grow.

In truth, Andrew could have stayed there for hours, relishing in her kiss and her embrace, but the bulldogs seemed to have other ideas.

Both of them leaped up at the pair, licking their cheeks and chins as if they were jealous of Andrew's attentions toward their mistress. He supposed it was their way of staking their claim to Frances, letting him know that she had been adored by them first.

"Very well, very well, I shall cease!" Andrew laughed, breaking away reluctantly. The dogs pushed their way between the couple and settled into Frances' lap, though the two of them together were far too large to fit comfortably.

Frances chuckled. "I cannot tell if they want kisses, or if they do not care for you silencing my very important sentences with such distractions."

"I swear, I shall never do it again," he teased, noting the flicker of disappointment in her eyes. The sight of it cheered him, for though she had not said as much, he hoped it meant she adored him, too.

"Do not say that," she urged. "That would be the cruelest thing to happen tonight, if you were to offer me a taste of passion, only to steal it away again."

He smiled. "Then, I shall never do it again while the dogs are around, so they will not be jealous."

"That is a far better prospect." She sighed contentedly, ruffling the bulldogs' fur. A moment later, her worry returned. "Does this mean you wish to remain at Fernside for longer than the wedding, or would you want me to visit Reeves Hall? I apologize, but all of this is entirely foreign to me."

"We can contemplate that later," he said, not wanting to think of it at all. For if he told her the truth, he feared it would obliterate this blissful occasion.

Frances shook her head. "No, I think it ought to be discussed now. I do not wish to sound like my father, but what are your intentions? It is my right to know, Andrew." She hesitated. "In your mind, what does your "affection" for me mean?"

He dropped his gaze and concentrated upon a bead of rain that slid slowly across the flat leaf of a weed. The downpour had eased somewhat, but it appeared the storm had only just begun. And, when

the drop finally fell from the leaf, he would be honest with her... though he sensed he already knew what it would cost him.

Gradually, the raindrop tipped from the peaked end of the leaf and tumbled to the damp, glistening soil beneath. He could not delay any longer.

"I cannot marry you, if that is what you are asking me," he said quietly. "When my father died, I vowed I would marry no one. That is why I sought to destroy my own reputation, as a means of protecting myself and any lady who might fall for me."

Frances hit him with a chilling glare. "So, you *were* toying with me?"

"No, dear Frances. I adore you, I am fond of you, and I... feel something for you that I have never felt for anyone. However, that does not change my stance." His chest seized uncomfortably, as though his very lungs were trying to keep him from making a huge mistake. "My experience of marriage is dire, and though I have spent my life ensuring I am nothing like my father, I fear there is too much of his blood within me. Never marrying anyone is the only way I can be sure that no lady ever suffers at my hand, as my mother suffered at his."

Her nostrils flared as she got to her feet. "That is ludicrous, Andrew. People do not suddenly transform into monsters. They are either raised to be monsters, which you have not been, or you would not have come out in the rain to rescue me; or they are born monsters, which you are not, either, for the same reason."

"It is not a risk I am willing to take," he replied evenly, hating the coldness in her unnerving, dark eyes. Moments ago, those same eyes had been filled with affection and warmth, and he wished he could see that again.

She nodded pointedly. "No, I think I can see that, now." She turned, tossing a last remark over her shoulder. "I did not want to marry either, Andrew. I have been afraid of it and have doubted that anyone would ever want me—anyone I wanted in return, I mean. You do not get to change *my* stance without changing yours. You do not get to lower my guard while keeping your walls up. If you felt this way, you should never have kissed me. Indeed, you will not again."

With that, she stalked away with her dogs in tow, though the hounds made sure to send a disappointed glance back at Andrew as they left.

What have I done? His heart and mind were screaming at him to call her back, and tell her he had not meant it, but the ghost of his father and the painful memories of his childhood kept his mouth sealed shut. Sometimes, the past was simply too difficult to overcome.

If he had but peered through the gloom, beyond the shrubs and bracken and bushes, he might have noticed another figure from his past, smirking slyly at the scene that had just unfolded. Someone far more dangerous, in the present, than his deceased father's looming memory.

Draped in a blanket, her sodden hair snaking down her back,

Frances gazed out of her bedchamber window at the storm that continued to rage outside. She had heard from Cariad that Andrew made it back safely, but she had no desire to seek him out. Not now, not ever.

What an idiot I am. She swallowed uncomfortably past the lump in her throat. Finally, there is a gentleman who admires me, yet he has no desire to marry me. What else did I expect?

“Franny!” Emmeline burst into the room unannounced, tearing across the floor and throwing herself into her sister’s arms. “Thank goodness you are all right! I was so worried for you! I thought you had gone away, because of... me.”

Frances embraced her sister with a peculiar desperation, battling tears with every passing second. “I thought I had brought shame on you, but that is not why I left. Not entirely.” She gave her sister the succinct version of events, without any mention of the kiss she wished she could forget. “One can only take so many insults before a limit is reached. I thought mine was harder than that, but it seems not.”

“I ought to send those vicious creatures away!” Emmeline cried, pulling away. “Would you like me to? I can explain to Mama and Papa, and see it done at a moment’s notice. Yes, it would rather serve them right if they were forced to travel through this storm. I will go immediately, and demand that they are removed.”

Frances smiled sadly and took hold of her sister’s hand, to stop her from following through with her threat. “They will be gone tomorrow,

anyway. There is no reason to let them believe that they have won, or that they managed to break me, temporarily.” She sighed. “I am all right, now. There is no harm done.”

“Until you awaken with an atrocious cold!” Emmeline protested. “You were out there for hours. I know you have the constitution of a farmer’s daughter, but that does not mean you are invincible.”

A genuine chuckle bubbled up Frances’ throat. “Cariad drew me a warm bath. The chills have all gone. I will awaken in good health, as I have always done.” She paused. “Do you remember when the cook’s son got lost in the snow?”

Emmeline nodded. “I think so.”

“I was out there for far longer, in much colder temperatures, and yet I suffered no sickness. Meanwhile, the cook’s boy was poorly for weeks before he recovered. I am not saying I am invincible, but I am as strong as I appear. Do not worry, sweet Emmy. I am just glad you are not cross with me.”

Emmeline dipped forward and kissed Frances’ brow. “I could never be cross with you, my dearest Franny. What you did tonight was nothing short of heroic. I just want everyone to know of it, but I will not go against Penelope’s wishes.”

“Nor will I,” Frances confirmed. “She has been through enough without fearing for her reputation. Has she been told about the contract?”

Emmeline nodded eagerly. “It calmed her immediately. You should have seen the change in her. One moment, she was trembling and fretting. The next, she looked like an entirely different person, smiling and thanking me and Peter. Of course, we took none of the credit, for that is all yours and His Grace’s.”

“Is he with Lord Croxley?” Frances said stiffly, fervently wishing that the next fortnight could go by in a matter of seconds. The sooner he left, the sooner she would be able to begin her healing. But while he was still in the Manor, how could she hope to recover from having her last chance of happiness taken away?

Emmeline shrugged. “I believe so, but it is woefully chaotic

downstairs. The servants are running around like headless chickens, trying to arrange chambers for everyone. Most of the other rooms have been transformed into dormitories, or something of that ilk, to accommodate so many stranded guests.”

“Cariad told me a few trees had fallen across the road.” Frances mustered a tight laugh. “So, even if I desired to send Lady Rachel and her harpies away, they would likely end up returning.”

Emmeline shifted awkwardly upon the window seat. “There is something I have to tell you, and I know you will hate it.”

“What?” Frances arched a concerned eyebrow. How many more strokes of bad luck was she going to receive before she took to her bed, in the hopes of a brighter, more fortunate tomorrow?

Emmeline twirled a strand of bronzed hair. “Mama and Papa announced there would be a second ball tomorrow night, to make amends for the... challenges of tonight’s ball. As the orchestra cannot leave until the storm passes and the roads are cleared, they agreed to it, and the guests seem excited by the prospect.”

“No... tell me this is a peculiar jest; I beg of you!” Frances slumped back against the wall of the window seat and closed her eyes, listening to the pounding of the rain against the glass. Ordinarily, the percussion comforted her, but that night, it sounded more like a war drum, accompanying her into her next conflict.

I cannot see him. I do not want to see him. How could he snatch away my first kiss, while knowing he would not change his mind? He might have fabricated his scandals, but he is still a scoundrel! She seethed in silence, not wanting her sister to know of her inner turmoil.

“I am sorry, Sister,” Emmeline replied softly. “I tried to dissuade them, telling them it would be ostentatious, but I think Mama and Papa hope it might stop the gossipmongers from spreading rumors.”

Frances’ eyelids opened. “You deserve a proper betrothal party, devoid of distraction and mayhem.” She forced a smile onto her lips. “If a second ball must be held in order to remedy the affliction of having a wayward daughter, then so be it. I promise; I will not ruin this one.”

“You did not ruin anything,” Emmeline insisted. “Something truly

irrevocable could have happened to Penelope tonight. You prevented it. My betrothal party means nothing in the face of that. In truth, if I had my choice, I would not have had a betrothal party at all; I would have hurried straight to the wedding itself.”

Frances laughed. “You are still besotted, then?”

“Gloriously so,” Emmeline replied, with a contented sigh. “I did not know a love like ours could exist, dear Franny. I have dreamed of it, of course, but no one ever expects a dream to come true.”

Frances turned her gaze back out toward the grisly, ferocious night. “No, I daresay they do not.”



Andrew had known what to expect the following day, but it still came as a jarring surprise when he encountered Frances at breakfast, and she did not say a word to him. She would not even look at him. Even if her gaze happened to turn in his direction, due to his mother or brother speaking to her, she stared right through him.

Can you truly not understand my perspective? He longed to catch her alone and ask her that very question, but she proved evasive throughout the course of the day. Whenever he caught a glimpse of her, she vanished the next moment, seemingly into thin air.

As the day wore on, stretching from morning into afternoon, he could no longer endure the mess of thoughts that roiled in his head. From moment to moment, he flitted between searching the entire Manor for Frances and declaring his love without conditions, to taking his carriage and departing the Manor entirely, even if it meant waiting hours for the roads to be cleared.

I am falling for her, there is no mistaking that, but I cannot make her my wife. Am I wrong to think I can have one without the other? He already knew the answer, but he could not accept it. No, he could not accept a life without Frances.

“She would not be a mistress,” he told his reflection, having taken to his bedchamber to calm his turbulent thoughts. Naturally, he had not been able to sleep a wink, and had taken to pacing instead. “I would not ask that of her. Surely, she knows that? Or maybe asking her to

love me, without marriage, is the same as asking her to be my mistress.”

He huffed out a frustrated groan and stalked toward the window. In the near distance, the forest swayed violently, tossed by powerful winds. The rain came in waves, and the last downpour had just calmed to a paltry spit. Another deluge would come, judging by the bruised clouds that swelled on the horizon, but perhaps there would be time to take a brief walk in the fresh air.

Perhaps, it will be enough to clear my head. He sensed it was unlikely, particularly as his eyes fell upon a small figure, wandering gracefully across the lawns, headed in the direction of the forest. Two familiar lumps ambled at her sides.

“I must make her understand,” he whispered, whipping around and running from the bedchamber. If he hurried, he might be able to catch her before she took a trail he did not know about.

Darting across the landing, he took the branching staircases two steps at a time, bounding all the way to the entrance hall. Fortunately, there were no other guests to witness his rushed pursuit, for the majority were nursing headaches from the night before, and the rest were readying themselves from the unnecessary second ball that the night ahead had in store.

At least, he thought there were no other guests.

“Do not, my boy,” a voice commanded, just as he passed the threshold of the Manor’s entrance.

He curtailed his sprint, turning around to find his mother standing beneath the porticoed porch. “Mother? You should not be out in such weather. It is bound to rain again soon.”

“I might say the same to you,” she replied softly, coming forward. “Where are you going, my boy?”

He hesitated. “I thought I would take a walk, Mother. The air in my bedchamber is much too suffocating.”

“Leave her alone.” His mother sighed, glancing mournfully toward the forest. “I spoke with her before she departed. She tried to conceal it,

but I could tell she had been weeping. You would not know anything about that, would you?"

Defensiveness pricked at Andrew's chest. "Why would you suspect that I am at fault? Do you believe that every gentleman, at some point, must be the cause of a lady's tears?" He regretted the words as soon as they had tumbled from his mouth, but that was the thing about words: once spoken, they could not be retracted.

"I neither said it was your fault, nor that you were the cause," his mother said, with a shake of her head. "Now, however, I know that you might be responsible somehow."

He froze, realizing his rashness. "I... um... well, I—" he trailed off, for what could he say to convince his mother otherwise?

"Why are you following her, my boy? Is it for an apology or to worsen her tears?" His mother edged closer to him, weaving her arm through his. "Either way, you should not go after her. Evidently, she needs some time alone."

For several minutes, neither of them said anything more. Andrew stared down at the flagstones under his feet, trailing the faint cracks in the surface while he decided how much he wished to tell his mother. When it came to struggles of the heart, he doubted she knew much. Her marriage had been one of business and convenience, not a match of love.

"Were you ever in love, Mother?" he whispered, hardly daring to ask.

She smiled sadly. "Once."

"You were?" His head snapped up in surprise.

She nodded. "When I first met your father, my heart belonged to another. A Baron. Goodness, he was handsome and so very sweet and tender." Her voice cracked, as if the memory pained her. "Of course, when I was informed that I was to marry your father, I had no choice in the matter. I met with my Baron one last time, in secret, and bid him farewell. He did not plead with me to elope or to stay with him, but there were tears in his eyes."

"I... did not know," Andrew murmured, dumbfounded.

She chuckled stiffly. "Why would you? No one ever knew. I saw him now and again, at balls and dinners and gatherings, but we passed one another as if we were strangers. He had married someone else, and your father would not have taken kindly to it if I had so much as smiled in his direction." She sighed. "Still, I never forgot him. He died, not long after your father, and I have always wondered... what if I had pleaded with him to elope, instead. What life might I have had?"

"Do you think you would have been happier?"

She shrugged, shivering slightly against the cold breeze. "I cannot say. That is the torture of not knowing." She looked up at him. "If you love her, do not make the mistake I did. Choose happiness instead. If you do not love her, let her go. The only way in which you could ever be like your father is if you tormented her with hope, then took it away."

A chill shuddered through him. Did his mother know what had occurred the previous night? Had Frances told her? He did not believe his mother could be perceptive enough to have figured out the situation on her own, though it appeared there were hidden depths to his mother. Maybe, she *had* guessed.

"I do not want to be like him," Andrew hissed, feeling as though an invisible hand had tightened around his heart. Every time he thought of the way in which Frances had left him in the woodland, it squeezed a little tighter.

His mother patted his arm gently. "Then do not be. It is a choice. Everything is a choice. Our decisions decide our fate and our future contentment. That is why I am offering you this warning—love her or do not, but do not play with her emotions. She does not deserve that."

"I cannot marry, Mother." His voice came out in a strangled pitch. "If I changed my mind, I have no way of knowing if I would hurt her."

His mother tilted her head up to look at the bleak sky, all hints of a formerly wondrous summer erased by endless gray and fast-moving clouds. "Perhaps not, but you cannot live your life in fear, my boy. Love can overcome a great deal. If you have that, happiness has no choice but to follow wherever you go."

"Love is not real," he murmured, while the foundations of his very being rocked beneath him. He had been so sure that it was a fallacy,

created to trick ladies and persuade gentlemen into the trap of marriage. Now, he did not know what to believe, for the ache in his heart felt very real, indeed.

“It is,” his mother replied firmly.

“How can you be certain?”

Her eyes shone with regret. “Because the agony when it is lost is incomparable.”

Gulping, Andrew gazed toward the forest, wondering if he had just lost the woman he was falling in love with. If the pain in his chest was anything to go by, he most certainly had.

Another deluge and the threat of being in further trouble if she did not make herself presentable for the second ball drew Frances back to the Manor. Nevertheless, the short jaunt into the forest had done her a world of good. It had not fixed her pain or given her clarity, but it had granted her a fleeting reprieve. The trouble was, everything flooded back, the moment she set foot back inside the Manor.

Might I feign a sickness? A headache? A feminine malady? Countless excuses ripped through her head, but the second she saw her mother, she knew none of them would suffice.

“Look at you!” her mother cried, clamping a hand to her mouth.

Frances glanced down at herself. “I see nothing amiss. I have all the limbs I left with.”

“This is not the time for jests, Darling. Cariat is tending to Emmeline, and your hair is soaked through. Goodness, this will not do. It will not do at all.” Her mother, gaze flitting anxiously up and down the nearside hallways, grabbed her daughter’s hand and physically hauled her up the stairs.

Too weary and heavy hearted to fight back, Frances allowed herself to be dragged. “What does it matter how I appear to the guests? They have all decided that I am an abhorrent slattern anyway,” she grumbled. “Yet, it is curious to me that no one has thought to question Lord Lea’s absence. They *know* what sort of fellow he is, but they would rather spurn me because I do not fit into their societal constructs.”

"Please, Darling," her mother urged. "Be placid for one evening, for your sister."

Something about her mother's expression prompted Frances to pull back on the older woman's arm, stopping them both. Indeed, though her mother was obviously frantic, her harried comments were even softer than usual. As if she regretted having to say anything terse at all.

"Who told you?" Frances lowered her voice to a whisper, in case guests were loitering in the shadows.

Her mother's expression twitched through a series of emotions: panic, apology, remorse, anxiety, and the slightest morsel of pride. "That is not important, Darling. I know, and I am sorry for any upset I caused you last night. You did a marvelous thing, and I am doubly sorry that you cannot be congratulated for it."

"I do not want to be congratulated," Frances replied. "I want gentlemen such as Lord Lea to be punished, but I suppose it is more likely that I *would* be congratulated. Both are so rare."

First glancing back over her shoulder, her mother surged forward and wrapped Frances in a brief, tight embrace. "I am proud of you, my darling girl. I am fortunate to have you as my daughter," she choked, clearly overwrought with emotion. "You are a blessing, my darling, and I regret that I have not told you more often. If you were not precisely who you are, Lady Penelope would be in ruins right now."

The confession stunned Frances into silence. From childhood, she had desperately longed to hear such words from her mother and father. They had never been wholly unkind or harsh with her, but they had unintentionally made it obvious that they found their eldest daughter strange. So many times, more than she could count, Frances had tried to change herself to please them, but it had never worked. Now, hearing that she was admired *because* of the woman she was, Frances did not know how to respond.

"Come, we must dry this hair at least, or it shall be untamable." Her mother broke away and took Frances' hand more gently, before tugging her toward her bedchamber.

She is proud of me. My mother is proud of me! A broad smile stretched

across Frances' face. *Twice, in the span of a day, I have been told I am admired, exactly as I am.*

Her smile faded slowly, for what did such an accolade mean if it gave her nothing in return? She would still be a spinster, she would still be alone, and she would still be a distasteful peculiarity to the rest of Society. Worst of all, there would still be no hope of a future with Andrew.



Seated on the outer edges of the ballroom, not far from the same spot where she had sat the previous night, Frances observed the revels in the manner she had been told to. In placid, docile silence, where she could not ruffle any feathers or cause any trouble.

“I thought she would have the decorum to stay in her chamber,” Lady Rachel muttered, making no attempt to be discreet. “I realize that this is her family Manor, but does she not understand that she is not welcome?”

Frances shot the wretch a dark look, breaking the rules for just one satisfying second. Lady Rachel caught the savage glare and flinched, but her swift recovery only led to further insults.

“Apparently, she ventured into the forest alone, to rendezvous with a secret lover,” Lady Rachel continued, raising her voice slightly. “I saw her return with my own eyes, and she certainly looked disheveled.”

Clenching her jaw and gripping the tablecloth in her hands, Frances did her very best not to retort. After all, Emmeline and Lord Croxley were dancing a marvelous waltz, and any loud remark might be heard over the orchestra's exemplary music.

“Did you truly?” Lady Georgiana clapped her hands together with macabre excitement. Indeed, Frances would never understand the delight that some young ladies gained from seeing another lady suffer.

Lady Rachel nodded proudly. “She looked rather like a drowned rat, with her gown all torn and muddled. I leave it to you to decide what she was doing in that forest, but she was absent for hours and hours. Apparently, a search party was almost sent to find her, but I doubt her mother and father would have been happy upon her discovery.”

“Are you quite fin—” Frances had the perfect response ready on the tip of her tongue, but it vanished like a snowflake as a shadow blocked her view of the vile women.

Andrew, breathing hard, stood over her. “Dear Frances, would you do me the great honor of dancing the next set with me?” He leaned closer as her mouth formed in a resounding, “No,” though she did not get to say the word itself. “Do not refuse me, Frances. This is your sister and my brother’s second chance for a peaceful betrothal party. I will continue to ask if you keep refusing, and I do not want to be the cause of any disruption.”

She eyed him with a coldness she did not truly feel. Since parting ways with him yesterday, he had been at the very forefront of her thoughts. She had barely slept because of him invading her dreams, where he kissed her lips once more, and promised her things that he had already told her he could not give her.

How I wish they were the reality, instead. You asked me to be your wife in the last one before awakening, and it broke my heart twice over when I opened my eyes and remembered— Her gaze dropped. Meeting his eyes only resulted in a sharp jab to the heart, so she could not imagine what dancing with him would do to her.

“Please, Frances, dance with me. It would be a shame to ruin a second party,” he whispered, his face almost as close to hers as it had been the previous night. If she were to close her eyes, she knew she would smell the damp forest and the scent of fresh rain and the soapy aroma of his skin.

Keeping her attention averted, she shook her head. “I did not ruin any party, Your Grace. It appears someone informed my mother and father of what really happened, so they are no longer livid with me.” She swallowed thickly. “Ask all you like; I will not agree. I owe you nothing, just as you owe me nothing. Was that not the conclusion of yesterday?”

“Yes, someone did inform them.” He cleared his throat. “I thought they ought to know the true nature of their remarkable daughter.”

Despite herself, Frances’ gaze shot up to lock with his. “You told them?”

"It was the least I could do, though, of course, I swore them to silence first. For Lady Penelope's sake."

She expected to see some semblance of pride or arrogance or self-congratulation upon his handsome face but found none. His dark-blue eyes, the same shade as last night's spoiled gown, shone with anxiety and, perhaps, something akin to hope.

"My answer is still "no." I do not know what you think this gesture proves," she said coolly.

Andrew straightened up and bowed his head. "Very well. I shall return in due course to ask again. There are numerous dances to be had, and an entire evening stretching ahead of us. With any luck, I will change your mind."

"As I have changed yours?" she taunted, wounded by his choice of words.

His face fell. "Anon, dear Frances."

Turning on his heel, he walked away, weaving through the guests and disappearing through the far doors. As she watched him, she noticed the collective demeanor and appearance of the guests, for the first time. She had been so caught up in her own mind that their mutual state of wild unkemptness had entirely passed her by. Those with actual chambers had fared better, wearing new garments, their hair well fashioned. Those without... well, one might have mistaken the ball for a country dance at a local inn.

Yet, I have not a single amusing word to say. Andrew had sapped her humor, which almost angered her more than his dogged desire to marry no one. A fact that, in essence, would turn her into a mistress if she wanted to remain in his affections. *You would stand a greater chance of agreement if you asked Piglet or Eris.* For Frances would be no man's mistress.

"Lady Frances?" a small, nervous voice distracted her from her bitter reverie.

She turned to find Lady Penelope standing a short distance behind her. "Lady Penelope, what a pleasure to see you downstairs." A warm smile replaced the cold one that Frances had mustered for Andrew.

“Please, take a seat. You must rest yourself.”

Penelope obeyed, her leg bouncing anxiously up and down. “I did not want to disturb you for too long, Lady Frances, as you looked so peaceful sitting here alone.” She coughed to clear the nerves from her throat. “Nevertheless, I could not resist coming over to... thank you for last night. I also wanted to apologize for the... um... repercussions you have faced, because of me. Truly, I wish I had the courage to tell the truth, but... I do not.”

“Ease your mind, Lady Penelope,” Frances insisted. “I have faced far worse, without any cause at all. I would come to your aid again, without hesitation, even if it meant facing twenty times the vitriol, for the cause was righteous. You have no need to apologize. Ever.”

Penelope smiled shyly. “I wish I were more like you, Lady Frances. I keep repeating the scene in my head, and I continue to be in awe of you. The strength and bravery you showed... you are truly magnificent, and I owe you so very much.”

“No, you do not.” Frances smiled affectionately. “You do not owe anyone anything. As for me being magnificent, I rather think my dogs were the most majestic players in that particular performance.”

Penelope chuckled. “They were! For a moment, I was terrified they might bite me, but they obeyed your every command.” She paused. “Do you think it would be wise of me to request a bulldog of my own?”

“It cannot hurt, as long as you train them well. If you do not, they will be atrociously lazy and never do a single thing you tell them to,” Frances replied, comforted by Penelope’s presence. The longer the younger woman stayed at the table, the longer it would be until Andrew came back.

Satisfied, Penelope gestured toward a small table of young ladies, who were all staring at Frances in unveiled veneration. An older woman sat with them, looking equally awestruck. She was not Penelope’s mother, as far as Frances could remember, but she might have been a chaperone. After all, it would not have ended well for that woman if something worse *had* happened to her ward.

“I ought to return to my friends,” Penelope said, scraping her chair

back. "But please know that there are many people who respect and admire you, so you must not listen to anything that others say. Especially those who are obviously jealous of you." She cast a subtle glance in Lady Rachel's direction.

Frances snorted. "Be at peace, Lady Penelope. Such creatures can insult me all they like, for they have little else to do to occupy themselves. It is often the case with those of small intellect."

"Yes! Quite so!" Penelope giggled, hiding her laughter behind her hand. A habit Frances had never fully learned.

With that, the younger woman headed back to her group, leaving Frances with a warmth in her chest. It spread like heated honey into her stomach and along her limbs, lightening some of the weighty load she had been carrying. Perhaps, it did not matter if she gained anything from the respect of others. Maybe, the respect was all the reward she needed... even if it still meant being alone, without Andrew.

I can revert to the way I was, can I not? I have not been altered irrevocably by one stolen kiss, have I? Come now, I must be stronger than that. She remembered her old saying, that "Unwed does not mean unworthy." Yet, it had taken on a different meaning since the last time she had thought of it. Andrew had his principles, and he was sticking to them. That did not make him unworthy of affection. Frances would have set aside her spinsterhood for him, if he had but asked. That did not make her unworthy, either.

I shall have to change it, but what to? Unwed does not mean unworthy, but being worthy does not mean you will be wed. She shook her head, confusing herself. In truth, she wished her mother had not made her promise to remain in the ballroom until ten o'clock at the earliest, for she would have liked nothing more than to take to her bed and dream of possibilities that did not exist in the real world.

As though summoned by her wayward thoughts of kissing him and being kissed, Andrew appeared once again at her table.

She blinked up at him. "I did not realize the intervals would be so brief."

"Yes, well I came across a flaw in my plan. You see, if you were to

follow someone like Lady Penelope to their table, I would have a lesser chance of succeeding,” he explained. “So, I thought it wise to appear sooner, rather than later, before you are whisked away by another series of admirers.”

Frances sighed, mustering the ghost of a smile. “I suppose you are proud that you were my first admirer?”

“Ah, you are mistaken there. Your sister was your first admirer, your lady’s maid was your second, Piglet and Eris were your third, the kennel master was likely your fourth, along with the servants who are so very fond of you. I am further down the list than you know, but pleased to be on it,” he replied, offering his hand. “Frances, would you do me the honor of dancing the next set with me?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You truly will not relent until I agree, will you?”

“Precisely.”

“How stubborn you are,” she muttered, reaching out to take his proffered hand. “In that case, I suppose I ought to get it over with. One dance, that is all. No more, no less, and you will not ask again.”

He bowed his head. “I consent to your terms.”

“Well then, prepare to feel the ache in your toes tomorrow, for this shall not be anything close to elegant,” she replied, standing up at the exact moment the orchestra faded to a finish.

Evidently, their first and last dance would begin without delay.

Andrew did not show his unease as the orchestra began to play the sweet, delicate music of another waltz. Being so close to Frances would only remind him of what he stood to lose if he maintained his stubborn resolve to be alone for the rest of his days.

Nevertheless, they took their positions upon the ballroom floor. Her hand slipped into his: her eyes defiant, as his fingertips rested just below the bottom of her shoulder blade. Against tradition, she did not place her hand to the rear of his upper arm. Instead, she clung to his shoulder, the tight grip revealing an anxiety that her stern face hid so well.

“I would ask if you had schemed this, but what reason would you have?” she muttered, as they began to move in sweeping rises and falls, joining the rest of the dancers in a synchronized rhythm.

He frowned. “I have every reason, dear Frances.”

“You must cease calling me that.” She turned her head so far to the side that she was almost looking back over her shoulder. “I do not wish to be dear to you, when there is no meaning behind it.”

Narrowly avoiding a collision with the couple ahead of them, which happened to contain Lady Georgiana in all her scowling glory, Andrew wished he was childish enough to put out his foot and trip the witch. He would not forget what Frances had told him about Rachel and her cruel followers.

“I have never said there is no meaning, Frances,” he urged, forgetting Lady Georgiana’s mocking sneer and the insults that ricocheted

through his skull. "The situation did not lend itself to a proper explanation."

Frances laughed coldly. "Oh, you explained yourself exceedingly well, Your Grace. You could not have made your stance clearer, in truth. I am under no illusions; I am merely protecting myself." She whipped her head back and stared intently into his eyes. "Is that not my right, since that was the crux of last night's conversation? If you can go to great lengths for yourself, I can do the same."

He could not argue with her rationality, when she was simply using his reasoning against him. Foolishly, the previous night, he had assumed she would understand his point of view, for she had mentioned on several occasions that she had no desire to marry, either. The part he had forgotten, however, was her explaining why; that it would mean settling for the dregs of Society's gentlemen: the old men, the poor men, the unfortunate-looking men, the ones no one wanted. He had not realized, until that moment, that she perhaps *had* a desire to marry... but with the right man. One who was worthy of her. One she had been waiting all this time for.

She thought it could be me, and I let her down in the most... callous manner. Indeed, he wondered if *he* might be one of those dregs, for what sort of wretch kissed someone he cherished, only to break her heart?

"I hoped, given time, you might come to understand my judgment better," he said quietly, knowing it was a weak thing to say. "I gave you every detail of my rationale. In truth, I did not think you would be surprised at all, for, in the brief time I have known you, I have never said anything to the contrary. You knew my stance."

She shot him a look so cold that he felt the ice of it sliding between his ribs and jabbing into his heart. "Evidently, you listened to nothing I had to say last night. *That* is something that should not surprise me," she muttered. "I assumed you did not wish to marry for the same reasons as other gentlemen of your lofty station: to avoid fortune hunters, matches of convenience, entrapments."

"Then you assumed wrong," he retorted, hating the petulant tone of his voice. She was not the guilty party here.

She smiled, but it did not reach the dark voids of her eyes. "I am

aware, Your Grace. But your real reason is, frankly, ridiculous.” They swept around in circle after circle, the conversation making it difficult to keep dizziness at bay. “You say you do not want to obey your father’s last wish. You would not be. If what you say about him is true, he would be horrified to discover that *I* was someone you cared for. I imagine he is already turning in his grave, seeing us dance so closely.”

Your Grace... Every time she said it, it stung him a little deeper.

“It is not about that!” Andrew hissed, blinking to try and clear some of the unsteadiness that plagued his balance. “That is why I will not marry Lady Rachel. The reason I cannot marry you is because I am afraid that I will become like him. Unless you were there, you cannot possibly comprehend the savagery and ruthless vindictiveness of that man, and his treatment of my mother.”

Frances sighed, as though bored of the discussion. “That is twice as ridiculous as not wanting to obey his deathbed demands,” she said. “Again, you evidently did not listen to me last night. You are as much your mother’s son as you are your father’s. What if, Heaven forbid, you were exactly like her, instead?” Her words dripped sarcasm.

“I would like to be,” he admitted, thinking of the wisdom his mother had imparted upon the front porch.

“Ah, but the difference is, you will not try,” Frances shot back, her hand gripping his tightly, her fingernails digging into his shoulder as they whirled around and around, seemingly getting faster with every note of the orchestra.

He guided them away from another collision, this time with Peter and Lady Emmeline. “This does not pertain to trying, Frances. What if I... were to transform, overnight, into someone you despise? You would not be calling me ridiculous, then.”

“Are you a vampire? A changeling? A werewolf, perhaps? Will you grow fur and fangs, and seek to tear me to pieces in the night?” she teased bitterly. “If that were your excuse, I would accept it. Otherwise, you are no monster, you are merely a fool.”

Despite being the one to ask her to dance, Andrew willed the music to come to an end. It had been a mistake to try and be near to her again.

He should have let her go, as his mother had suggested, to spare himself the turmoil that raged in his heart. He wanted to love her, he wanted to give her security, he wanted to be with her, but his concerns, however irrational they might have seemed, could not be overcome.

"I am sorry to have disappointed you, but you must know that I was not asking you to be my mistress. I would not dishonor you in such a way," he replied heavily, struggling to split his attention between her and the other dancers that seemed to spiral all around him.

Her nose crinkled and her lip trembled, visibly struggling to hold back her upset. "You already dishonored me, Your Grace," she rasped, breathless. "You tricked me. You made me believe that something had changed. And, though you might not want to admit it to yourself, you essentially *did* ask me to be your mistress. For if I was never to be wed to you, but we would behave as a married pair, what else would I be?"

"I... well, I... um... I know of many on the Continent who are happily paired without the need for marriage," he floundered, hearing, at last, what his confession of affection must have sounded like to her.

She snorted. "You have read too much Byron and Shelley, and all the rest of those unsavory fellows. They live in a poetic fantasy, where their infamy is their currency." She gulped. "If they were all ladies, you can rest assured that they would all be disgraced, and not a single one of their poems would be read. That is the injustice we ladies face. We cannot be frivolous with our affections. Moreover, you and I are not from the Continent. My French is terrible, my Spanish worse, my German... the less said about that, the better."

"I am not with frivolous with *my* affections, Frances," he urged, feeling slightly sick. "I cherish you. I adore you. I—"

"Will not marry me," she interrupted, "so you may save whatever adulations were about to follow. You do not see, do you?"

Frustration clenched his jaw. "See what?"

"You were frivolous with *me*, Your Grace," she wheezed, clearly struggling with her dizziness, too. "If your mind could not be changed, if you could not see sense through this ludicrous notion about your

father's blood in your veins, if you had no intention of protecting *me* and *my* reputation, you should not have kissed me. You... cheapened me, Your Grace, and I never thought I would allow anyone to do that."

His heart splintered: a raw pain cracking through his chest. Of all the things she could have said, that hit him the hardest. He valued Frances above everyone, aside from his mother and brother. She meant the world to him, and yet he had made her feel worthless.

Could refusing her be... turning me into my father? The possibility twisted in his gut, adding to his nausea. What if she was the key to keeping him from becoming that man? What if she was the person he had been waiting for, who would undo all the torment of his past? What if she was all that and more, and he had gone too far to get her back?

Just then, the orchestra came to their lilting conclusion. Before he could say a word, Frances released her hold upon him and dipped into a fleeting curtsy. The next moment, she strode away, abandoning him in the center of the ballroom floor.

"Is something the matter?" Lady Emmeline appeared in front of Andrew, in the same spot Frances had just vacated.

He blinked slowly. "I... fear so."

"Is she poorly?" Lady Emmeline scoured the ballroom, looking for her sister, but Frances had hurried away on swift feet. Nowhere to be seen.

He nodded. "I believe she is in great pain, yes." He bowed to Lady Emmeline. "I will tend to her. Return to your dancing, and I will inform you of her welfare in due course."

"Are you certain?" Lady Emmeline hesitated, likely torn between running after her sister and remaining blissfully in Peter's arms.

Andrew forced a smile. "I am, Lady Emmeline. Whatever she might need... I will find a way to remedy her pain."

Certain that Frances would send him away, but unable to bear the thought of them parting ways so abruptly, he raced after her. For he

was beginning to realize that there was something he feared more than his father's lasting influence. And that was losing her.

O*f course, you would steal away my sanctuary, too.* Frances curled

her hands into fists as she charged up the staircase to reach her bedchamber. Her fraught mind and tense body craved the cooling respite of the outdoors, but after Andrew's rescue the previous night, she doubted she would be safe from discovery, out in the forest.

"You betrayed me, did you not?" Frances tutted at Piglet and Eris, who lay in front of her bedchamber door, waiting for her patiently.

They bounded toward her, wagging their tails and jumping up to get their overdue scratches and strokes. Of course, Frances could not resist them, and sat right down in the hallway to shower them with her affection.

"I forgive you, but I am still displeased," she said, chuckling softly as they knocked her flat on her back. Bringing her hands up to her face, she pretended to fend them off, though they were the only thing keeping her from melting into a puddle of tears.

Eris, forever more perceptive than Piglet, bumped her in the face and emitted a sympathetic whine. Sighing, Frances wrapped her arms around the darling bulldog and held her tight, accepting every wet kiss the mischievous hound had to give. In the meantime, Piglet clambered up onto her stomach and flopped down, not realizing his weight or size.

"What would I do without you, my darlings?" Frances whispered, burying her face in Eris' fur. Indeed, it seemed like a terrible punishment, that dogs did not live as long as humans. One day, she would have to say her last goodbyes to these beautiful creatures, and

then what would she do?

“Even if I purchase other dogs, many years from now, they will never replace either of you,” she promised, allowing her pent-up tears to spill, where they soaked into Eris’ smooth coat.

She would have lain there for the rest of the evening, content to let her dogs begin to repair her heartbreak, but the *clip-clip* of shoes upon the hallway floor made her sit up. Eris and Piglet’s hackles immediately rose, and a low growl rolled from the backs of their throats.

“What is the matter?” Frances turned and understood. It appeared the night’s trials were not even close to being over.

Lady Rachel sauntered nearer, though she kept a safe distance away from the dogs. “I would have a word with you, Lady Frances,” she said brusquely, eyeing Piglet and Eris with a healthy dose of wariness. “There is something important that I must tell you, but I cannot say it if those... creatures are growling and spitting at me.”

“I cannot think of anything that you and I have to say to one another, Lady Rachel,” Frances replied. “Unless you wish to create a list of my perceived weaknesses and shortcomings, so you might garner further ammunition for your amusing little mockery councils? I could offer you some more creative choices, for yesterday’s insults were rather... uninspired.”

Lady Rachel sniffed. “I have no desire to insult you, Lady Frances. I would speak to you, lady to lady, about something that cannot wait.” Her breath hitched. “Indeed, it is more urgent than you know, but I will not be comfortable as long as those beasts are present.”

“That could be arranged, but not without an apology.” Frances seized her opportunity to humble Lady Rachel. After all, if the beastly woman had not been so vicious yesterday, forcing Frances to flee for her own sanity, perhaps Frances and Andrew would not be in their predicament.

I cannot blame you entirely, Lady Rachel, but I can pretend you are responsible. With the healing to come, I daresay that will come in very useful. She would not have been the first woman to lie to herself, in order to recover more quickly from a fractured heart.

Lady Rachel blinked in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"An apology, Lady Rachel. I trust you are familiar with the term, or perhaps you are not? I suppose you have had no cause to be." Frances smiled, enjoying herself a little. "I believe it is defined as a "regretful acknowledgement of an offense or failure." I might not have been offended, not really, but the intent was offensive. Ergo, if you wish to gain a few moments of my valuable time, you will have to apologize first."

The maelstrom of emotions that crossed Lady Rachel's pretty, spoiled face was a true sight to behold. It began with outrage, moving into disgust, before sliding through contemplation, revulsion, anger, and then, at last, a softening that looked a lot like resignation. Indeed, it was high time Lady Rachel learned a vital lesson: she could *not* have everything she wanted, merely by stirring up a fuss, especially if it involved Frances' attention.

Folding her arms across her chest, Lady Rachel stared at a nearby portrait of the Chiltern Hills. "I apologize for my behavior last night, and for the rude things I said when we first met. It was unbecoming to lower myself in such a fashion, and I regret it." She paused, glancing back at Frances. "However, once you hear what I have to say, you might come to comprehend the reason *why* I behaved with such impropriety."

You cannot simply say you are sorry, can you? You must make it into a dramatic display, always. Frances sighed, not knowing whether to accept the apology or not. Then again, she *had* said she regretted her actions, which went further toward contrition than Frances had anticipated.

"Very well, I thank you for your apology. If you would wait here for a moment, I will see to it that my dogs do not disturb our discussion." Frances got to her feet and beckoned for Piglet and Eris to follow her into her bedchamber. Inside, she gestured for them to go and lay down by the warmth of the fire. They did so immediately, settling down together, side by side.

I will not be long, my darlings. Keep a spot warm for me. She smiled at the dear pets, before heading back out into the hallway, closing the bedchamber door behind her. Cariad might get a shock if she went in before Frances returned, but at least the dogs would be safe in there.

“Would you care to speak somewhere more privately? I have a study downstairs, or we can take a turn about the gardens, or upon the terrace? I do not know the nature of this conversation, so I cannot be sure what you require.” Frances already regretted agreeing to this, for what good could come of speaking with such a woman?

Lady Rachel stared down at the floor, appearing uncharacteristically nervous. “The study might be preferable. What I have to tell you cannot be overheard, as much for your sake as for mine.”

Her curiosity piqued, and laced with no small amount of apprehension, Frances led the way. Retracing her steps down the staircase and into the entrance hall, they turned right down a narrow hallway that was rarely used by anyone other than the servants. It was precisely why she had chosen the study there, so no one would disturb her while she was reading.

“Where are you taking me?” Lady Rachel sounded equally hesitant.

“My study,” Frances replied simply, coming to a halt outside a small door that curved into a peak at the lintel. Slipping a key from underneath an elaborately decorated vase, that adorned the side table closest to the door, she turned it in the lock.

On any other day, the appalled expression upon Lady Rachel’s face might have made Frances howl with laughter. Unfortunately, with her heart still aching from the knowledge that no agreement could ever be reached with Andrew, she was in no mood for amusement.

“It is... quaint,” Lady Rachel said, tucking her arms into her sides to avoid touching anything.

In truth, keeping the study tidy had gotten away from Frances somewhat, and as she forbade the servants from tidying it for her, it did resemble the aftermath of an explosion. If that explosion contained nothing but books and papers and various notes, among discarded quills, a few forgotten garments, and far too many neglected cups of tea and plates of crumbs.

Taking her time, Frances removed tangled blankets and a couple of well-thumbed tomes from one of the two armchairs that flanked an unlit fireplace. The other was never burdened with the contagion of her mess, for that was her favorite reading spot.

“Please, sit.” Frances gestured to the opposite chair as she sat down in her own, feeling the familiar give of the comfortable cushioning.

Lady Rachel pulled a face but did as she had been asked. Whatever the revelation was, it truly must have been important, if she would deign to sit in such a dusty, unkempt armchair.

“Would you care for a tea service to be brought?” Frances smiled sweetly, permitting herself to relish in the revenge of the moment.

Lady Rachel shook her head effusively. “No, thank you. I hope this will not take very long, and when it is done, I would retire to my chamber. I am... exceedingly weary, Lady Frances.” She took a shaky breath. “You see, it is no secret that I am not well liked. I am impulsive and rash and, yes, I have been cossetted by my mother and father. However, I see that only as a gesture of their love, which all daughters should experience.”

“And your unkindness?” Frances prompted, secretly unnerved by the blunt honesty in Lady Rachel’s confession. She had assumed that Lady Rachel thought herself to be as adored by Society as she was by her parents.

Lady Rachel laughed tightly. “It is... a habit, I am afraid. As you use humor to shield yourself, I use spite and pick upon the weaknesses of others, lest my own be revealed.” She swallowed loudly, visibly uncomfortable. “I particularly indulge in it when I consider someone a threat to me.”

“You cannot possibly consider *me* to be any kind of threat?” Frances sat back in the armchair, truly baffled by this honest and vulnerable version of such a nasty woman.

Lady Rachel’s eyes met Frances’, the blue of them watering with a sadness that Frances did not yet understand. “You might be the only true threat I have ever encountered, Lady Frances. That is why I decided to humble myself and ask if you might speak with me, for... you are my only hope of salvation.” A small sob cracked her voice. “I do not know what else to do, and I pray that I have not been so disgraceful toward you that you will refuse to show sympathy.”

“Whatever do you mean?” That faint thrum of dread that Frances had formerly felt, swirling in her abdomen, became a fierce pulse.

Something was awfully wrong, and it had brought Lady Rachel to tears.

The woman's breath hitched. "He promised he would marry me, Lady Frances. He wooed me, he charmed me, and he tricked me into his bed... swearing that he would wed me, and that I had nothing to fear." Tears trickled down her cheeks, but she made no move to wipe them away. "No doubt he has informed you that all of his scandals are lies, but *that* is the lie, Lady Frances. I know because I believed it too, and now—" She trailed off, covering her face with her hands as sorrow shook her slender frame.

"And now?" Frances prompted, terrified that she already knew the answer.

Through choking sobs, Lady Rachel let the axe fall. "I am with child, Lady Frances. That is why I pleaded with Lady Penelope to gain me an invitation to the betrothal ball, for he has refused to see me, ever since I told him," she croaked. "I have gone to his Estate, only to be sent away. I have tried everything. I was desperate, Lady Frances, and then... I saw him with you: the way he looks at you, the way he seeks your company, the way he is kind to you while he is cold with everyone else. It is the very reflection of my experience."

An involuntary gasp of horror jumped out of France's mouth, while her chest seized in a grip of crushing agony. Her mind swirled with a thousand clashing thoughts, some disbelieving, some painfully accepting, some favoring Lady Rachel, some favoring Andrew. Yet, there was one particular sentence that lodged in her mind, adding credibility to Lady Rachel's tale: "*No doubt he has informed you that all of his scandals are lies, but that is the lie, Lady Frances.*"

She had not entirely believed Andrew the previous night, when he had explained his constant inclusion in the scandal sheets. Indeed, it had smarted of a more palatable excuse, which would not deter Frances from allowing him to kiss her. Moreover, how could Lady Rachel have known that Andrew had told her that, unless he really had said the same thing to her?

"I know he has wooed you, too, but I pray I am not too late to save you from the same fate," Lady Rachel continued, shivering in her chair. "He will make you believe there is hope of a future with him, but once he has taken what he wants, he will... abandon you. He will

use every excuse, claiming he cannot marry because of some ridiculous reason involving his father. Of course, he will not mention that part until *after* he has ruined you.”

The blows kept raining down, and Frances felt like she was no longer in her own body. She was floating above herself, listening to Lady Rachel’s story as if she were listening to someone read to her. It would not have made a comforting novel, that was for certain.

“I imagine he has muddied my name to you, as well,” Lady Rachel added, bitterly. “He has likely told you that I believe I am entitled to become his Duchess because of a long-standing promise, made between his father and mine. It is simply not true. Yes, we have been acquainted since I was a child, but I never expected anything of him until he began to court me in secret. *He* made that promise of marriage so I would give myself to him. All I want is for him to do what is right, for me and for our unborn child.”

Head spinning, lungs straining, heart pounding, Frances could not think clearly. Everything Lady Rachel said corroborated with something Andrew had told Frances. That did not make it true, of course, but it would not have been the first instance of a young lady being left to fend for herself once a child was created.

“He has done this before, or so I have since learned.” Lady Rachel hiccupped, finally smearing the tears from her face. “Before I was tricked by him, he told me of several ladies that he had “helped,” so they would not have to marry gentleman they did not care for. I have met those ladies, and they tell a very different tale. One that echoes yours and mine. There are other children, too, now in destitution because of him. I cannot have that for my child, Lady Frances. I cannot!”

It proved to be the last nail in the coffin, solidifying the truth in Lady Rachel’s revelations. Frances did not want to believe it, even now, but that conversation between her and Andrew had been held in private. Lady Rachel had no way of knowing that he had told Frances such things.

“You have not... lain with him, have you?” Lady Rachel clamped a hand to her mouth, her body trembling violently as her other hand smoothed over her belly.

Frances shook her head. “No.”

“Then you must help me,” Lady Rachel pleaded. “Urge him to wed me, before I become destitute, too. My mother and father have spoiled me, but my father will not tolerate this. He will cast me out or wed me to a decrepit old gentleman who will not care about being cuckolded, and... it will destroy me.”

Standing slowly, Frances paused. “Wait here.”

“You are not going to cast me out, are you?” Lady Rachel’s eyelids fluttered with panic.

Frances shook her head. “No, Lady Rachel. I am going to do as you have asked.”

“F rances, there you are!” Andrew spied her coming out of a

hallway on the opposite side of the entrance hall. Despite his proclamation that he would find her, he had been pacing that hall for longer than he cared to admit, trying to muster the courage to venture upstairs.

Stony faced, she met his gaze with equally unfeeling eyes. Of course, he had not expected a warm reception, but the intensity of her frosty demeanor immediately informed him that something was amiss. Something bad.

She marched up to him, took him by the hand, and dragged him out of the front doors. He was too stunned to resist or ask why they were going outside. Although, he suspected it might relate to the fact that the guests were still in the throes of their enjoyment, milling about with their increasing inebriation.

Tugging harder on his hand, Frances did not stop until they had ventured all the way along the front terrace and around the Manor, pausing at the stables. It seemed an odd place for a conversation, but also rather wise, considering no guests would come out here.

“Frances, there is something I must—” He began his second confession, only to be curtly interrupted.

“Is it true?”

He reeled back, disarmed by the fury in her dark eyes. “Might you elaborate?”

“Is the child yours?” she replied: her tone so rife with pain that the sentence sounded like a long, agonized gasp.

Bemusement overtook his alarm, for he had not the faintest idea what she was talking about. Yet, something had lit a raging fire beneath her, and he knew better than to laugh at the question.

“Again, might you elaborate?”

Her face contorted into a mask of bitter regret. “So, there are more than one.” Dropping his hand, she stepped back as if he were a bear in the woods, ready to charge at her. “If she did not lie about that, I suppose she did not lie about the rest.”

“Dear Frances, I—”

“Do *not* call me that!” she barked, tears brimming along her lower eyelids. Her finger jabbed at him, though it prodded nothing but air. “I do not want your terms of endearment. They are tricks, meant to lead me astray. No, meant to lead me into your bed, to be... not your mistress, but your amusement!”

Andrew flinched as if her finger had landed in the center of his chest. He knew he had caused her pain, he knew he had disappointed her, but these harsh words seemed to have come out of nowhere. Indeed, though she could occasionally be crude in her language, hearing her speak of him leading her to his bed left him utterly dumbfounded.

He tried to take a step toward her, but she put up her hands, curling them into trembling fists.

“Stay where you are,” she commanded, the tears now coursing down her cheeks in glistening streams. “Do not come anywhere near me. I cannot believe what a fool I have been! I cannot believe I permitted your lips to touch mine!”

Shaking his head to try and urge some understanding into his mind, he folded his arms behind his back in a gesture of peace. “Frances, would you please explain what you are talking about? I am... at a complete loss. What has happened since you left me in the ballroom? Why are you so distressed?”

“Lady Rachel came to me,” she replied, her voice thick with emotion.

“She told me everything. I did not want to believe it, but... what choice do I have?”

Suspicion bristled up the back of Andrew’s neck. “And what, pray tell, did she reveal to you?”

I should have insisted that the wretch was turned out of the Manor. I should have known she would not relent so easily! He cursed himself in silence, realizing that there *was* trickery afoot, but it had not come from him.

“That she is with child, and you are the father.” A sob racked Frances’ chest, and her knees buckled. She staggered back toward a nearby stack of haybales and sank down onto them. Holding her head in her hands, looking so small and miserable that all Andrew wanted to do was run to her and wrap her in his embrace, she told the rest of the story: how he had fooled Lady Rachel, dishonored her, abandoned her, refused her pleas, and would not take ownership of the child.

“As for those ladies you said you had helped out of unwanted marriages—I believed you, but she says there are other children. Your children.” Frances crumpled into unrestrained tears, wheezing and gasping through every word. “How could she have known what you told me, if you had not said the same thing to her?”

For a long while, Andrew said nothing. He did not want to speak before he was prepared or say something he might later regret. Evidently, Rachel had dug much deeper into her reservoirs of determination, conjuring a tale so terrible and slanderous that poor, sweet Frances would have had to believe it. For only a madwoman could conjure such an awful story.

“I do not know,” he said evenly.

Smearing her nose upon the edge of her gown, Frances refused to look him in the eye. “Perhaps it is best that I do not know any more than I already do. It is of little importance.” She hiccupped violently, claspings a hand to her chest. “I have come here with one purpose, and one alone... and that is to plead with you.”

“Plead with me?”

She nodded. “You must marry her, Andr—Your Grace. She is already

disliked among Society, as she admitted herself. It will utterly decimate her if you do not take responsibility for her and the child she is carrying.” She bent forward until her forehead almost touched her knees, struggling for breath. “You must, Your Grace. Do not leave another child destitute. Do not break any more hearts.”

He should have been furious with her for believing any of the nonsense that spewed from Rachel’s hateful mouth. Yet, looking at her, seeing her misery, feeling her pain, he could not. He felt only sympathy and sorrow, for even in the midst of her own anguish, she was pleading for the security and future of someone else. Someone she did not even like.

Beneath your tough exterior, you have the gentlest of souls, my dear, darling, beloved Frances. His heart ached, thinking of the turmoil that made her weep and wheeze like that. Her suffering was palpable, and he would have liked nothing more than to take it away.

“Come with me, Frances.” He extended his hand, without any hope of her taking it. “There is someone you should talk to.”

He was desperate to deny Rachel’s spiteful accusations, but she had trapped him rather expertly. If he sought to explain himself, it would sound like a feeble excuse. If he denounced her lies as the falsehoods that they were, it would be his word against Rachel’s. The trouble was, she had “evidence” in the form of the scandal sheets, and a couple of unfortunate young ladies. Ladies he *had* tried to help, though the desired outcome had failed miserably.

They would lie for you, Rachel; I am certain. They have been looking for an excuse to take their revenge upon me, though I was not at fault. He fervently wished he had been excruciatingly honest with Frances, the previous night, for then she might have seen through Rachel’s lies.

“Who?” Frances did not take his hand, but she did stand up on unsteady legs.

He smiled sadly. “You will see.”

Head bowed, he made his way back to the Manor, feeling rather like Orpheus in the underworld. He did not dare to glance behind him to make sure his Eurydice was following, in case she was not. After all she had heard, he would not have blamed her for staying behind.

This will be tortuous... but there is nothing else to be done. Steeling his resolve, he ascended the porch steps and went back inside. This time, he did not linger in the entrance hall, but continued directly up the staircases.

The faint thud of footsteps at his back let him know that Frances was there, but he still did not turn. For if he did, she might see the tears in his own eyes. Tears of exasperation, that he had built the very cage in which Rachel had ensnared him. All for the sake of a protection he no longer cared about, not if it meant losing Frances. Or worse, her despising him, and believing him to be the scoundrel he had pretended he was.

Down the hallway, he stopped in front of a bedchamber door and knocked lightly. "Mother?"

"Who is it?" came the small, tired voice.

Andrew sighed. "Your son, Mother, and Lady Frances. We must speak with you, as a matter of great urgency."

"Oh... then, do come in," his mother replied.

Opening the door, Andrew entered first and walked straight across the room to the window. There, he finally turned and watched Frances come into the chamber, closing the door behind her. She looked the way he felt.

"Goodness, Lady Frances! Are you hurt?" His mother shuffled off the bed, attired in her nightclothes and a blanket, which she hurriedly wrapped around herself. She went to Frances and lifted a hand to the younger woman's face, brushing away the tears that continued to fall.

Frances narrowed her eyes at Andrew. "Your son brought me here, though I do not know why." She paused. "Not that I am not pleased to see you, Your Grace. It is always a delight." Her voice cracked, and the forced smile upon her lips only highlighted her obvious sadness.

"What did you do?" His mother whirled around, her lower lip quivering. "I told you, my boy. Did you forget so quickly?"

Andrew could not help feeling somewhat persecuted, but there was no time for wallowing. "I need you to tell Lady Frances all you know of

Lady Rachel. *She* is the one who has upset Lady Frances.” Swallowing the squirming discomfort in his throat, he swiftly detailed everything that Frances had said in the stables.

No mother should have to hear such things about her son, but you are my only hope—

“I cannot defend myself, despite it being untrue,” he concluded, sitting down upon the window seat. “As such, I need you to help Lady Frances see that I am not the liar. Lady Rachel is.”

At first, his mother seemed frozen in place. She had listened without interruption, showing no expression to indicate her feelings upon the matter. However, after a few minutes, she turned to Frances and took hold of the younger woman’s hand. Gently, she guided Frances toward the bed, where they both sat down, their backs to Andrew.

“I have known Rachel since she was a child,” his mother began. “Even as a little girl, she was wretched, and I do not like to say that about any child. She would scream until she was sick, if she could not immediately have her way. I wish I could say she improved with age, but she only got worse.

“No less than five servants were dismissed from our Hall because of her, when her family visited during the summer. Please understand, this was when she was older,” she went on. “She lied about them, and said they were... romantically involved with my son. I knew they were not, because they had come to me, begging me to send Rachel away, for she had threatened them all viciously when all they had done was ask my son if he needed anything.”

Frances nodded slowly, giving Andrew a sliver of faith that all was not lost. At the very least, she was listening.

His mother sighed. “Then there was the summer in which Rachel became infatuated with my nephew, Gerald. He was a couple of years younger than Andrew.” She dropped her chin to her chest, for it was not an easy memory to relive. “My brother had not long died, giving Gerald the title of Viscount rather earlier than expected. Rachel certainly relished in that fact. She harassed him, pursued him, tormented him, in an attempt to garner a betrothal. He must have been twenty, while she had recently turned six-and-ten.”

“What happened?” Frances urged, keeping hold of the old woman’s hands.

“She lied,” his mother said sadly. “She went to her father and informed him that Gerald had dishonored her, and that she was carrying his child. If I remember correctly, she even managed to get a doctor to lie for her and confirm the pregnancy. Naturally, Gerald was horrified. He knew nothing of it, for he had done everything within his power to avoid her.

“News reached my husband, and he demanded that Gerald marry the girl,” his mother continued in a strangled voice. “Gerald was as petrified of my husband as everyone else, but he did not want to be tied to a deceitful little creature like that. The sweet, dear thing fled the Manor under cover of darkness, exiling himself. I later discovered that he had joined the infantry and gone to fight in France, likely hoping the truth would out while he was there, so he could come back with a cleared name. However, he... did not return.”

Frances gasped. “No... oh goodness, no.”

“The months went by and, of course, Rachel showed no signs of pregnancy.” Andrew’s mother glanced at him briefly, offering a weary smile. “Eventually, she admitted that she had lied, though she framed it as a jest that had gone awry. She wept and wailed and managed to convince her father and my husband, who considered it “youthful exuberance.” It was nothing of the sort. It was vengeful scheming that inadvertently killed a bright, lovely young man.”

Hesitantly, Frances twisted her head to look at Andrew. “Would you wager that Lady Rachel is also lying about your son?”

“I would stake everything I have on it,” his mother confirmed. “As for this wretched business with the scandal sheets: it is as he says. He does not know this, but I have seen the letters he sent to them. I also know of these young ladies whom he aided, for several have come to the Estate when he has been away. I gave them whatever they needed, and they left again, but not without giving an explanation first.”

Andrew gaped at his mother, as dismayed as he was relieved. The very notion of his mother reading those tawdry letters sickened him to his stomach, as he had not been subtle with the made-up details. However, the latter part of her confession filled in a gap that had

bothered him for some time. He had often wondered why the two ladies who had ended up in worse situations had not tried to ruin him, in return.

It was you, Mother. Your kindness must have been enough to dissuade them. He had never been more in awe of her.

“Have I been a terrible fool once again?” Frances whispered.

Before Andrew’s mother could answer, an almighty smash clattered through the quiet of the bedchamber, coming from the hallway outside.

Frances was up on her feet first, with Andrew sprinting for the door, right behind her. Tearing the door open, Frances and Andrew barreled out into the hallway, just in time to see a figure in red silk disappear down the stairwell.

“We must catch her!” Frances cried, running after Rachel.

Andrew joined the chase, racing side by side with the woman he adored. They crossed the entrance hall together and rushed out into the warm night air, where no hint of a storm remained. There, they skidded to a mutual halt, watching the wild vision in red as a rickety trap carried her to freedom. She sat atop the driver’s box herself, snapping the reins savagely, until the horses stretched into a gallop. In the back of the trap, milk pails rattled together.

“We may add “thief” to her list of crimes,” Frances panted, holding her sides.

The trap certainly did not belong to Rachel, but neither Andrew nor Frances made a move to continue their chase. By the time they commandeered a carriage, Rachel would be long gone, for the rest of the horses had all been unhitched and were resting in the stables.

At that moment, someone came charging around the side of the Manor, waving a woolen cap in outrage. “Where’s me cart?! Who’s taken me cart?!”

Andrew and Frances exchanged a glance.

“I will calm him,” Frances said. “And... I am sorry for doubting you.”

He smiled stiffly. “If I were you, I would have doubted me, too.”

As she hurried away to tend to the incensed milkman, Andrew unleashed a heavy breath. Rachel might have gone, and Andrew might have been saved from taking responsibility for a child that did not exist, but nothing could close the rift that had formed between him and Frances. He had shattered her trust in him, and Rachel had stomped on any fragments that might have been pieced back together.

I realized too late, my darling, that it was always supposed to be you—

“I am pleased they are all gone,” Emmeline murmured, curling into her sister’s arms as an owl hooted from the darkness. “For a moment, I feared Mama and Papa might announce a *third* ball.”

Frances smiled, hugging her sister tighter. “They would not have dared. Mrs. Devin would have abandoned ship if they had asked her to feed a small army for a third night.”

Four days had passed since the night of Lady Rachel’s departure, though the other guests had been less eager to leave. The last of the revelers had finally trundled away in their carriages that afternoon, and the Manor already felt normal again. There had been a great deal to clean and tidy, and Frances had happily offered to help, for it served as a welcome distraction.

“Although,” Frances added, stroking her sister’s soft hair, “we shall have to do it all again in a little over a week from now.”

Emmeline peered up at her. “Is it so soon?”

“Oh yes. You will be a blissfully married woman before you know it, and I shall have to start thinking about where to have my witchy cottage built,” Frances replied, while she fought to ignore the weight that hung heavy on her heart. In truth, the prospect of being alone frightened her.

Emmeline covered her face with her hands and giggled excitedly. “I simply cannot wait, Sister! You will visit us, will you not? I know you said you would, but I must be certain. I might be a married woman soon, but that does not mean I will lose my proud title of Sister.”

“Of course, my sweet Emmy,” Frances promised, staring up at the ceiling. If Emmeline was not careful, Frances would end up being a permanent resident at Croxley Manor.

Wriggling, Emmeline twisted around and propped herself on her elbows. “Did you enjoy the second ball? I have just realized that I did not see you after you waltzed with His Grace. Goodness, the two of you looked so wonderful, whirling and twirling together.” She sighed dreamily. “Am I an awful sister? I must be, if I did not notice your absence.”

“How could you, staring so deeply into Lord Croxley’s eyes at all times?” Frances teased. She wanted to tell Emmeline what had occurred that night, but whenever she mustered the courage, a peculiar fatigue held the words back. The entire debacle, it seemed, was just too exhausting to repeat. Besides, her sister had reveled in the second ball. What good would it do, to tell her that not all had been rosy?

Emmeline chuckled. “I heard His Grace was rather poorly. Did you waltz him into a dizziness he has not yet recovered from?”

“It is a trifling cold, that is all,” Frances replied. The morning after Rachel’s escape, the news had come from the Dowager that he had not been well, and when Frances had pressed her for more information, the old woman had revealed that he had a slight fever and a constant cough.

I suppose being soaked to the skin in the forest finally caught up to him, or he is hiding from me. Frances had vowed never to disbelieve Andrew again, but perhaps a white lie had been told. After all, both of them were guilty of causing harm to the other: he had broken her heart, she had accused him of atrocious things. Seeing one another, after that, would not have done anyone any good.

“You ought to take a tea service to him,” Emmeline suggested. “Peter thinks he is rather fond of you. Now, I am not saying you ought to wed him, but it would be rather lovely if the two of you were friends. If love blossomed, then that would simply be a happy accident.”

Frances pulled her sister back into her arms. “Go to sleep, sweet Emmy. You will not be able to if you excite yourself with notions of my implausible nuptials.”

“Very well,” Emmeline replied, stifling a yawn. “I really am rather tired. Can I sleep here tonight? Do not send me back to my chambers. They are much too lonely.”

Frances swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Of course you can sleep here,” she whispered, for she did not want to be alone, either.



The following day, eager to reclaim some sense of normalcy, Frances headed out of the Manor with Piglet and Eris in tow. A cool breeze swayed the grass, while a clear sky spread out overhead. It was the perfect sort of day for a lengthy walk, and as there were no more preparations to be made until the wedding, she could be entirely at her leisure.

Entering the forest, she followed the overgrown path, admiring the new buds and blooms that had unfurled after the rainfall. The air smelled fresh and earthy, laced with the sweetness of wildflowers: a perfume she adored. Indeed, she was trying to find all the little things that usually brought her joy, in the hope that it would help her forget everything else.

She had been walking for an hour or so, when the dogs perked up. Piglet lunged forward and disappeared into the undergrowth, while Eris grumbled at Frances’ side. Suspecting it might be a rabbit or something, Frances did not diverge from the path, but carried on through a particularly dense section of trees.

On the other side of the coppice, where the forest opened out again, she stopped. Andrew sat a short distance ahead of her, on a shallow slope, with Piglet on his lap. The fickle, loveable creature could not have been more pleased, but Eris maintained her loyalty, emitting an annoyed bark in Andrew’s direction.

“I thought I warned you about this part of the forest,” Frances said, adopting a demeanor of nonchalance. After all, Andrew would be here until the wedding was over, and if they were to endure the coming days in the same Manor, friendliness was sure to see them through. Even if it was forced.

Andrew met her gaze. “I wanted to make sure I had not dreamed this place,” he replied. “That all seems so long ago, now.”

“It is peculiar how weeks can feel like years,” she agreed, closing the gap between them. “That being said, the last few days have *really* dragged on. I thought those Lord and Ladies would never depart. Personally, I blame Mrs. Devin’s exceptional cooking.”

He laughed, but it rang hollow. “My mother is particularly fond of the cook’s talents. I have never seen her eat so much. Just this morning, she was raving about the coddled eggs.”

“I have never understood that term.” Frances sat down in the grass, keeping a polite distance. Any closer, and she feared there might be a repeat of their night in the rain. He had not become any less handsome because they had quarreled, nor had she lost any spark of affection for him, despite various attempts to extinguish it.

Andrew frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The term ‘coddled eggs.’ It suggests they are spoiled, but they are always delicious. Unless it is supposed to mean that they are well taken care of and indulged during the cooking of them.”

He shrugged. “Whichever it is, my mother adores them.”

They sat in awkward silence for a while, tension simmering between them. In this place that had featured so prominently in their fleeting, flawed courtship, Frances lost control over her emotions. They bubbled to the surface, tugging at her heart, urging her to shuffle closer to him so that he might kiss her again. Fortunately, she still had control over her body and her movements, though it took every ounce of willpower she possessed, not to do as her heart wanted.

“I heard you were unwell,” she said, breaking the silence.

Andrew nodded. “It was inevitable, I suppose, that I should fall ill after—” He trailed off, leaving her to fill in the rest. “Anyway, I am much improved today. There is medicine in the air of these forests; I am convinced of it.”

“It would not be of much benefit if you wandered too close to that chasm.” She pointed down the path, to where the undergrowth concealed the gaping mouth of that treacherous void. Wooden signs had been constructed ten paces from the lip, at her secret instruction. As favored as she was by the servants, it had not been difficult to

arrange.

But you were not supposed to see it, dear Andrew.

He chuckled more easily. "It appears someone finally thought to put up warnings, so no one else can make my mistake." He cast a sideways glance at her. "Was it you?"

"You have found me out." She concentrated upon Eris, scratching the sweet bulldog's back. "Indeed, it should have been done a long time ago."

Frowning down at Piglet, Andrew made a noise of frustration. "I have been a fool in so many ways since arriving here, Frances. I have likely been a fool prior to that, too." He shook his head in despair. "Part of me wishes I had never come here, but I am not sorry that I did, even though I know I cannot fix the upset I have caused."

You can, Andrew. If you were to confess your feelings again, they would not be unwelcome. Frances' wayward mind had, apparently, forgotten that even if he did, they would be back in the same maddening situation—he cherished her, she cherished him, but it could go no further.

"Are you very cross with me?" she asked. "I did wonder if you were hiding from me, though your reddened nose rather suggests that you *were* unwell."

He smiled. "Is it so very red?"

"Grotesquely so," she teased, grateful that they could still enjoy a casual rapport.

A genuine laugh slipped from his lips. "You are nothing if not brutally honest, dear Frances." He resumed scratching Piglet between the ears. "And no, I am not cross with you. I have no cause to be. There is only one person who has my wholehearted anger, but I doubt I shall be seeing her again, to inform her of my ire."

"Do you think she has learned her lesson?" Frances still could not fathom the despicable lengths that awful woman had gone to, to try and claim Andrew for herself. And that was without contemplating the poor soul who had died as a result of her wicked determination.

Andrew puffed out a breath. "For a while, at least. If rumors were to escape into Society of what she had done, she would never be able to show her face again. I suspect she will hide for a time, until she is certain I have not spoken of her behavior, and then she will probably latch onto some other unfortunate devil."

"So, you do not imagine she is still attired in her silk gown, somewhere to the north of the country, snapping the reins of that milk cart?" Frances allowed herself a grin, for the image was rather hilarious. "There is every chance she might have reached Scotland by now."

Andrew laughed, casting a fond glance in her direction. "Surely, she would be halted at the border. If I were a guard, I would suspect she intended to cause trouble."

"At least she would be Scotland's responsibility, not ours." Frances met his fond eyes, remembering how they had gleamed with promise and desire. In truth, beneath the sheen of melancholy, she thought she could still see a glimpse of that longing.

So, it did not alarm her when he moved closer, lifting his hands to her face. He cradled her cheeks as if they were the most precious thing in the world, his thumbs tenderly caressing the flushed apples. Their eyes locked, saying everything that they could not utter aloud, but the air between them remained tinged with sadness.

"I am sorry," he whispered, his mouth so close to hers.

She smiled wanly. "As am I."

"I never meant to hurt you," he said thickly. "Truly, I did not."

Not knowing how to reply, Frances leaned closer, bringing their lips to within a hair's breadth. If he kissed her now, it would be calamitous, for she did not know if she would ever recover. Yet, it was precisely what she wanted, for if she was to be a lonely spinster forever, it would serve her well to have some memories of a time when something more might have been possible.

"Dear Frances," he murmured.

Their lips were half a second from touching, when a twig snapped,

exploding through the silence like a lightning bolt. It jolted the pair apart, both of them scouring the woodland for the culprit. The two bulldogs seemed unperturbed, which comforted Frances slightly. If it had been someone from the Manor, Piglet and Eris would have sounded the alarm.

Just then, a badger snuffled out of the bushes, a short distance down the path. It was not usual to see such a creature in the daylight hours, but the large beast was certainly big enough to cause a twig to snap.

“Ah, it appears my chaperone caught up to me,” Frances said, waiting for the rapid pounding of her heart to slow.

Andrew nodded. “I daresay he arrived just in time.”

Indeed, the moment had shattered into unsalvageable smithereens, though it rather felt like divine intervention. Evidently, someone was watching over them, and that someone had decided to keep them apart.

Maybe, that is truly for the best.

Not once did Frances suspect that the intervention was not divine at all, but something from the realm of evil, instead.

A truce of sorts made the ensuing week bittersweet. After being disturbed by the badger, Andrew and Frances had been far more careful in the time they spent together, for both had realized that being alone with each other was a bad idea.

If they walked in the woodland, they walked separately, though their paths would, perhaps, cross here and there. Or they would walk as a quartet, with Lady Emmeline and Peter. They rode often, also, with the betrothed couple, without any suggestion of racing. In the evenings, the four of them gathered together with Lord and Lady Fernside, and Andrew's mother, enjoying cheerful pastimes in the large drawing room or the music room.

"I did not realize you were gifted at the pianoforte," Andrew had complimented just the other night, after hearing Frances play for the first time. It had charmed him immensely, inviting daydreams of what it would be like to hear that delightful music filling the halls of Reeves Hall.

Frances had snorted. "You ought to have a doctor look at your ears, Your Grace, for they must be obstructed if you find my playing to be pleasant."

She had returned to her self-deprecating humor, using it as a wall between them. He could sense it—an invisible barrier that kept him at a safe distance. During countless moments, he had contemplated battling through that barrier and kissing her again, usually when they had wandered ahead of Lady Emmeline and Peter, or were almost the last people in the drawing room. But on every such occasion, a worry in her eyes held him back. She had made her stance clear, and he had

no choice but to respect it.

Now, with mere days left before he would be expected to depart Fernside Manor, Andrew experienced an unease like nothing he had ever endured. The ticking of the clock and the passing of every hour induced a rush of panic into his chest, as if he were running out of time to complete a gravely important task.

“You look very pale, Brother,” Peter remarked from across the chess table in the smaller drawing room. The brothers had made it their own personal place of entertainment when the weather turned sour. At present, a furious downpour turned the outside world glossy with moisture, the raindrops thudding at the windowpanes.

Andrew looked up from his pieces. “Hm?”

“Are you still poorly? Mother said you were quite recovered from your cold, but perhaps the fever is lingering.” Peter leaned over the table and pressed his palm to his brother’s brow. “You do not feel too warm.”

Surprised by the tender gesture, Andrew smiled. “I am quite well, Brother. It is nothing but anxiety for tomorrow.”

“Why should you be anxious?” Peter drew back again. “You are not the one getting married, and I do not have a single shudder of nerves. I thought I would be frantic by now, but I cannot wait for tomorrow to come. Truly, I am certain that Emmeline will make me the happiest gentleman alive, and I will spend our lifetime trying to make her the happiest lady.”

Andrew nodded slowly. “I am glad for you, Peter. It is no less than you deserve, to find a young lady who brings you such peace and surety. I imagine it is a rare thing.” He looked down at his chess pieces, fumbling for the next move. “Lust and desire and fleeting enchantment are as common as sparrows, but discovering true contentment, and an easy rapport that makes you feel comfortable... *that* ought to be the real hope for any lady or gentleman.”

“Now I know there is something amiss with you,” Peter replied, staring at Andrew with curious eyes. “That was uncharacteristically... poetic of you. Indeed, I have been waiting for you to invite me to flee, as you did when we arrived here.”

Laughing sadly, Andrew raised his head. "You would be an idiot if you ran from Lady Emmeline. She is beautiful, amusing, gentle, intelligent, and generous of spirit. Moreover, you love her. What is there to flee, unless you are averse to being disgustingly happy?"

"I thought you did not believe in love." Peter arched an eyebrow, evidently wondering if he was really playing chess with his brother, or a physically convincing counterfeit.

Andrew shrugged. "I did not."

He neglected to elaborate, as part of the truce that had settled between him and Frances. They had both agreed to stay silent about their affections, and about Rachel, in case they ruined the wedding as well as almost ruining two betrothal parties.

Nevertheless, Peter seemed too intrigued to leave it at that. "Has your mind changed? Is this something to do with Lady Frances? Emmeline and I have both noticed a fondness between the two of you, when you think you are not being watched. You glance at her, then turn away. She glances at you and does the same."

"My mind has not changed," Andrew replied, though it was not exactly an answer to his brother's initial question. His mind *had* changed on the prospect of love and marriage, but his staunch position in the world of bachelorhood had not altered. It all boiled down to one point: Frances deserved better than him, and he would not selfishly request that she put her faith in him once more.

Peter sighed. "That is a shame, Brother. Emmeline and I had secret hopes that there might be an affection between you and Lady Frances, which would lead to a marriage of your own." He adopted a thin smile. "It is your move."

"Yes, it is, is it not?" Andrew pursed his lips and observed his side of the board, dwelling tensely upon the subtext. Tomorrow was the wedding, and the plan was to leave the day after. With two days at his disposal, perhaps his situation with Frances did not have to be a stalemate. It all depended on what move he made next.



As evening fell, the household gathered once more in the large

drawing room, though the atmosphere held a thrumming difference. It was the last night that Emmeline would be an unmarried woman, and the celebratory mood proved infectious.

Frances, sitting on the rug by the fireplace, with a glass of brandy in her hand, clinked a hairpin against the fine crystal. The chime of it brought everyone's attention to her.

"As there will be a crowd wanting to congratulate the Marquess and Marchioness of Croxley tomorrow, I thought we might go around and share stories of the handsome pair," she announced, smiling adoringly at her younger sister. "If they are not both beetroot-red with embarrassment by the end of our tales, then we will begin again." She flashed a reassuring wink at Emmeline, to ensure she knew she was teasing.

The girls' father, who had already imbibed rather too much, raised his glass upward, sloshing a great deal out onto his hand. "I would be the first!"

"Very well, Father. What tale do you have to tell?" Frances hugged her knees to her chest, ignoring her mother's disapproving look. Indeed, she had found a sense of peace in knowing that nothing more would take place between her and Andrew. She could be herself, as she had always been, content in the knowledge that she would only have herself to rely on.

Her father tilted his head in thought. "When she was but a little girl, she was utterly transfixed by the koi carp in the fishpond. If any door was left open, she would wobble out on her unsteady little legs and go directly to the pond." He chuckled at the memory. "Of course, that distressed her mother and me, so we instructed that all doors were to be locked if she was ever left alone for a moment."

"Ah, yes!" The girls' mother nodded, apparently recalling the same memory. "I was a nervous wreck, terrified she would wander into any body of water, including the horse trough."

The girls' father took a sip of his spilled drink. "One day, the drawing room door blew open—the one leading into the gardens. I cannot recall why, but Emmeline was on her own. Pulled by the temptation of the koi, she escaped within seconds, and her mother and I rushed in to find her gone. We hurried out, knowing where she was likely to be,

and there we find Frances, sitting on the edge of the pond, with a crying Emmeline in her arms. Both of them were soaked.”

“Now, you must remember, neither of them could swim,” the girls’ mother added. “That was the moment we knew that Frances would always protect her younger sister, and now that protection will fall to you, Peter.”

Lord Croxley raised his glass and smiled. “It will be my honor and my privilege.”

“These tales are supposed to about the betrothed, Mother, Father,” Frances chided playfully, catching sight of Andrew in her periphery. He beamed with a curious sort of pride: his eyes warm with an affection she wished he would not show. It only made their distance harder to bear.

Emmeline chuckled. “You are intertwined with my life, dearest Sister. Of course the tales will be about you, too. You did not think you could escape embarrassment, did you?”

“Ah, you know me too well. I can never escape embarrassment,” Frances replied, struggling with the twinge of sadness that pinched at her heart. Nothing would be the same with Emmeline gone, and while she was looking forward to Emmeline’s happiness, Frances would not have minded if the evening stretched on for days and days.

“I remember when Emmeline was twelve or so,” their mother swooped in with the next story, “and there were visitors at the Manor. I cannot recall who, for they are no longer acquaintances. I was walking through to the library, to select a book for the afternoon, when I spied Emmeline halfway down the hallway. There were two other girls, far taller and older than she, but she was berating them as if she were the elder.”

Frances frowned, for she did not know this story. “Do you mean Lady Isabelle and Lady Catherine?”

“Yes, precisely,” her mother replied, with a distasteful curl of her lip. “I ducked into a nearby doorway so I might overhear and intervene if necessary. Emmeline was shouting at them and wagging a finger at them, scolding both girls for being unkind to Frances. I knew I should have put a stop to it, but I could not. Indeed, I do not think the two

girls ever insulted Frances for the rest of their stay, though it was enough for me to avoid inviting that family again.”

A warm swell of gratitude rushed through Frances’ veins, as she turned her gaze back toward her sister. All this time, she had thought she was the one protecting Emmeline, but it appeared her younger sister had not been complacent, standing up for Frances in secret. In truth, it made her wonder how many others Emmeline had scolded over the years.

“You are very sneaky, Mama!” Emmeline cried, cooling her cheeks with the back of her hands. “I did not know you overheard that, though I have always been curious as to why Lady Isabelle and Lady Catherine were never invited again. Now, we all know.”

Their mother smiled. “It has been the greatest joy of my life, raising the two of you, and watching you become the fine ladies that you are today. You are my eternal pride, and I... just want you to know how much you are adored.” She paused. “Everyone always asked me if I longed for a son, but the truth is, I never have. The two of you were, and are, more than enough.”

“At least you will not have to say farewell to both of us,” Frances said, wanting to ease the obvious anguish that crinkled her mother’s face. It was a happy occasion, but that did not mean there was no place for bittersweet tears.

Her mother nodded. “That is true, my darling. I would be howling at the wind if I were to wave goodbye to both of you in one fell swoop.” She laughed awkwardly, joined by the Dowager. A shared understanding of motherhood, and what it meant to let a child go when the time came.

“Your Grace, do you have any stories to tell?” Frances encouraged, feeling a prickle up the back of her neck. The heat of Andrew’s gaze.

Does any part of you wish this could be us, sharing stories before our wedding day? She would not torment herself with the answer.

The Dowager smiled and sat back in the comfortable armchair, swirling her glass of brandy in thought. “There is one moment that has never left my thoughts. Peter was newborn, and I was resting in my chambers with him in my arms. I heard the door open, though it was

the early hours of the morning.” She paused. “I see my dear boy, who could not have been more than five years old, tiptoeing into the room. He stopped when he saw me.”

“Did he not favor having a brother?” Frances’ mother asked, intently listening to the story.

The Dowager chuckled. “Quite the opposite. He had hoped I might be sleeping, so he could look at his brother without interruption. But when he saw that I was awake and knew he was there, he hurried over and climbed onto the bed. He said, “Can I hold him?” I was nervous, of course, but I passed Peter into his brother’s arms. To this day, nothing has broken my heart, in the best possible way, like seeing my eldest cradling his younger brother and whispering such sweet things.”

“What did he say?” Peter seemed as curious as everyone else, though Frances noticed that Andrew had turned his attention away. Even in the shadows of the drawing room, she could see the flush in his cheeks.

“He promised to protect Peter,” the Dowager replied. “He said he would box anyone who tried to hurt Peter, no matter how big or scary that person might be. And Peter gurgled, as if he understood how loved he was.”

A momentary solemnity settled over the room, especially for those who knew the true meaning of Andrew’s boyhood words. That big and scary person was likely their father, prompting Frances to wonder how far Andrew had taken his promise. What punishments had he received in trying to protect his brother? How many beatings? How many barbed words?

“I remember Peter streaking into the drawing room, entirely naked, when Mother had one of her friends to tea,” Andrew said unexpectedly, drawing the room’s attention toward him. “He was six, and covered in Mother’s rouge, claiming he was a tiger. He leaped onto Mother’s poor friend, and I do believe he bit her, saying she was his dinner.”

Within seconds, the drawing room erupted into raucous laughter, while Peter squirmed with humiliation. Somehow, the sternest man in their party had salvaged the celebratory mood. In that moment,

Frances could not have adored him more.

“That is barefaced slander!” Peter protested, taking hold of Emmeline’s hand. “I swear, I did not do such a thing.”

The Dowager cackled, holding onto her stomach as peals of laughter rocked her back and forth. “You did, Darling! How could I have forgotten? For years, dear Sybil refused to come to tea. She would only come to dinner, when she knew you would be asleep.”

“Brother, how could you?” Peter gasped at Andrew, his cheeks growing redder as tears of hilarity finally fell, and he joined in with the amusement.

In the chaos, Andrew’s eyes sought Frances. Subtly, he lifted his brandy glass, as if to say: *“This is a toast to what might have been.”* In kind, Frances raised her glass, realizing it was a farewell.

The following day, the serenity of Fernside Manor found itself shattered once more, with a steady flow of guests arriving for the wedding. The cook had arranged a massive buffet in the dining room, to keep the visitors fed and content while the last-minute preparations were underway. Indeed, the guests spilled out in every direction, crowding the hallways and gardens, wielding plates of delicious food as they sought a spot to picnic.

“There is nothing traditional about this Manor, is there?” Andrew said to Frances, as they slipped away with their arms full of flowers and wreaths for the chapel. It had not been their choice to proceed alone, but the rest of the family were equally occupied with hurried tasks. As such, Piglet and Eris were the only chaperones available.

Frances laughed. “I am afraid not. Your brother is marrying into a very modern dynasty. Too modern for some tastes.” She eyed him. “We were not seen, were we?”

“I highly doubt it. Many of them cannot see a thing over the enormous piles of food they have pilfered.” Andrew looked back over his shoulder, to where the swarms of guests were sprawled out upon the sun-warmed lawns, devouring the cook’s offerings as if they had not eaten in months.

They walked on through a circular coppice of trees, separate to the forests that surrounded the Manor, careful to remain hidden. Indeed, their escape to the chapel had been a rather comical sight, with the pair ducking behind walls and trees and bushes, before darting on to the next potential hiding spot. Fortunately, once they were out of sight of the Manor, they would be able to stroll at a more leisurely

pace.

“Hurry,” Frances urged, running across the gap of lawn that bridged the coppice and the eastern spread of forest.

Andrew obeyed, covering the ground quickly, until, at last, they found themselves beneath the secure camouflage of the woodland. Although, Andrew did not know where they were going, for he had walked these forests many times, and had never seen a chapel.

“How is your sister faring this morning?” he said, relaxing.

Frances beamed with radiant joy. “She is ecstatic. I do not believe she slept a wink, though you would not know it, to look at her. She makes an astonishingly beautiful bride, but one would expect nothing less when she is an astonishingly beautiful young lady.”

“As are you,” he blurted out, emboldened by the concealment of the woodland.

She halted and stared up at him. “You should not say such things, Your Grace.”

“Perhaps not, but I would say them anyway.” He smiled nervously. “And please, while we are in these woods, do not call me “Your Grace.” I cannot abide it, when I have known the sweetness of hearing you say my name.”

Shaking her head, she marched on at a rapid pace, to the point where he feared she might break into a sprint to get away from him. Still, she kept to the recently cleared path that weaved through the trees—a trail he had not walked upon before.

Before long, the path gave way to a dappled glade. In the center, a remarkable chapel of gray stone, topped with a slate roof, stood like something out of an ancient myth. Perhaps, that was why he had never seen it before. Like mysterious places of old, maybe a person had to know of its magic before it could be found.

Frances took a step toward the chapel, only to whirl around and stride away from the beautiful building, tramping back into the forest. Puzzled, Andrew followed her.

She stopped so abruptly that he almost careened straight into her. “Why did you say that? Why do you keep toying with me, when I thought we had agreed to leave our feelings well alone?” she barked, now out of sight of the chapel. “Do you delight in tormenting me? Do you not understand that my affections for you have not changed, and will not change if you continue to give me hope?”

“You have never confessed your affections,” he pointed out, letting the cooler air of the forest soothe the heat of his brow.

Frances tilted her head up to the sky. “Why do you think that is, Andrew? I would confess a thousand times if I thought it would make a difference.” She lowered her gaze to meet his. “Or would you hear it, so you can feel the true extent of my heartbreak before you leave me for good?”

“I would... hear it,” he replied, steeling his resolve. With limited time left, he knew he had to make his last move, or regret it for the rest of his days.

Her mouth twisted into a miserable smile. “I love you, Andrew. You have stolen away the heart I thought I had locked up so tightly. It is yours, and when you depart tomorrow, you will take it with you.” She dropped the flowers and the wreaths. “Are you content, now?”

“Yes,” he whispered, dropping his cargo in return.

With his arms empty, he closed the gap between them, sweeping her up into his embrace. He could not contain his love any longer, nor would he. He had made his decision and his final move. And, as he picked her up into a bridal hold, he dipped his head to kiss her.

For a few seconds, she did not respond in kind. Instead, her fists pounded weakly against his chest in a faint attempt to push him away. The trouble was, he knew her strength. If she had truly wanted him to cease, she would have struck him so hard in the face that he would have seen stars.

Confirming his hopes, her fists unfurled, her palms smoothing up his chest and slipping around his neck, where her arms looped. A moment later, her lips moved against his, kissing him back with a fervor that disarmed and thrilled him. There, in his embrace, he held everything he had ever wanted, and he had no intention of letting it go again.

The forest stilled around them as they gave into their emotions, kissing as though they had no tomorrow. And at their feet, Piglet and Eris sat down, thumping their tails happily against the grass. To Andrew, it felt like they had given their permission and their forgiveness, cheering his spirits and his resolve.

A glorious eternity later, Frances broke their kiss and wriggled in Andrew's arms, twisting herself out of his embrace until he set her down again.

"This is ludicrous!" she gasped, gathering up the flowers and wreaths as swiftly as she could. "There is no time for this now, Andrew. The guests will be arriving soon, to take their seats, and the chapel is not yet close to being decorated properly. Goodness, what was I thinking?" She hurried away with the flowers bouncing in her arms, but her departure did not put a pin to Andrew's mood.

She did not say she regretted it, and she called me "Andrew" once more. With any luck, there would be time to further explore their potential future, once Lady Emmeline and Peter had secured theirs.

So, smiling contentedly, he collected his fallen flowers and raced after Frances.

Once inside the chapel, he could tell that something had shifted between them. As Frances charged about the cavernous space, adorning the walls and sconces with wreaths and blooms, she made sure to touch the small of his back, or his hand, or his forearm, or his shoulder when she passed him. And her smiles, seen in his periphery, were jubilant. In return, he lightly touched her face, her hair, her hands, whenever he skirted by her to proceed with his own decorations.

One day soon, we will be the ones celebrating within this place. He did not say so out loud, for he knew Frances would not appreciate any attempt to try and steal any glory from Lady Emmeline's day. Still, it warmed him to think that, soon, he would be able to offer her what he had not before.

Before long, the chapel cascaded with blooms and blossoms and freshly dusted wreaths. Even to Andrew's untrained eye, it looked exquisite and magical. Precisely what Lady Emmeline and Peter deserved on their joyous day.

“Shall we see if there is any food left?” Andrew suggested, leaning down to place a kiss upon Frances’ cheek.

She pulled away before his lips could touch her skin. “There shall be none of that wickedness within these hallowed walls,” she chided playfully. “If you wish to kiss me again, you must do so outside, so our immortal souls do not perish. And yes, I am ravenous.”

Chuckling, but respecting her wishes, Andrew offered his arm and the two of them headed back out of the chapel. The dogs joined them as they emerged, all four walking in a bubble of happiness as they made their return to the Manor.

However, like all good things, their cheer was not destined to last.

Halfway back to the Manor, nearing the dense coppice that acted as a camouflage from the guests upon the lawn, a figure emerged from the shadows. Blonde hair tangled into a bird’s nest of disarray, blue eyes wild with hatred and bitterness, attired in an uncharacteristically simple dress of plain, white cotton, Rachel had returned.

“You did not think you had seen the last of me, did you?” she rasped, swaying slightly as she approached. “I have told you countless times, my dear Duke, that I *will* have what is owed. A promise was made, and you will heed it, or you will regret it for the rest of your days.”

Andrew stood in front of Frances, putting his arm out to keep her behind him. “Do not embarrass yourself any more than you have already done,” he warned. “You are fortunate I did not inform every guest at the ball of your malicious lies, but make no mistake, I will do what I must in order to protect my reputation and that of Frances.”

“Do not!” Rachel hissed. “Do not speak of her so affectionately! You are *my* Duke, not hers.”

Andrew shook his head. “I have never been your anything, Lady Rachel.”

“You kissed me! That was your promise to me!” she retorted, her eyes glinting with malice.

Realizing he had not told Frances about that, a difficult decision forked ahead of him. Either he admitted what he had done and sought

to explain it in a way that Frances might understand, or he denied all knowledge of such an event. Prior to that day, he might have taken the cowardly path, but if he was to have a life with Frances, it could not begin on any more lies.

“We kissed upon the day of my father’s funeral, in a moment where I was so overcome with hatred and confusion that I did not know what I was doing,” he replied evenly. “I kissed you out of cruelty, not fondness, in a vain attempt to... feel something. As I told you before, you could have been anyone, and, as it turned out, it did not help me to feel anything. It only made my numbness worse.”

Rachel flew at him, beating her fists against his chest. “That is a lie!”

“It is not, Lady Rachel. The only person who has been able to make me feel something other than darkness and bitterness, in the entirety of my life, is Frances.” He grasped Rachel’s wrists and held her backward, dodging the swift kicks she tried to deliver to his shins. “I have tried to apologize for any misunderstanding, but you have not accepted it. Nevertheless, whatever you want from me is something you cannot have.”

“I *will* have it!” Rachel screamed, panting in fury. “If you do not agree to marry me, here and now, I will ruin you both. You have no notion of what a desperate woman can do, but you will find out.”

Andrew sighed. “You cannot destroy us, Lady Rachel. Anyone with half an ounce of intellect can see that you have driven yourself mad with jealousy. There is nothing you can do to get your way.”

“There is,” she spat, wrenching away from him and puffing her chest proudly. “I saw the two of you kissing in the forest, during that downpour. I heard everything you said and saw everything you did. And I saw you kiss again, just now, and so close to the sanctity of a church, too. How appalling you are.” She smirked. “Of course, I will make the scenes more tawdry, so they will be sure to shock everyone who hears of it.”

Frances peered out from behind Andrew’s shoulder. “So, *that* is how you knew about the scandal sheets.” She laughed coldly. “To think I believed a single, hateful word that came out of your mouth. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“Never,” Rachel shot back. “Can you not see that *I* am the better match? His father favored me, while he would have abhorred you. I am beautiful, I am charming, I am graceful, I am everything a Duke could desire in a Duchess. But *you*... you are a mockery of what it means to be a lady. You do not even look like a lady! You are repulsive, foul, crude, and unseemly. With you at his side, His Grace would be a laughingstock.”

Andrew marched right up to Rachel, looming over her with his full, imposing height. “She is more beautiful than you could ever hope to be, Lady Rachel. What is more, her exquisite exterior matches her wondrous interior. Her mind, her heart, her generosity, her loveliness—they triumph over any woman.”

“You do not mean that,” Rachel croaked, her eyes flickering with sudden doubt. “I am destined to be the Duchess of Reeves. It can be no one but me, and I will tear you apart if you refuse me again. You might recover, but Lady Frances will not. And what, pray tell, do you think that would do to your brother and Lady Emmeline? They would be ostracized by association.”

Andrew seethed at the wretched willpower of this vicious creature. He opened his mouth to retort, but Frances’ voice cut through the air before his could.

“Would you take a husband who did not love you, or even like you? Have you so little respect for yourself and your worth?” she said, with an eerie tone of calm. “Is it your long-sought dream to force a man into marriage, using threats and lies and deceit to have him? It is true that you are more beautiful than I am. That cannot be argued. But your manner and your behavior make you so very ugly.”

Rachel glared at Frances. “I would have what is owed. I do not care how I win, as long as I do.” She smiled unnervingly. “I can see that neither of you are as afraid as you should be, but that will be soon be remedied. Let us all hope that the Duke sees reason, Lady Frances, before it destroys your life, your sister’s life, and your family’s entire position in polite Society.”

At that moment, Rachel drew in a deep breath. But, instead of an exhale, she unleashed an ungodly scream that splintered through the forests, startling a flock of crows. As the sleek, black birds erupted into the sky, the echo of Rachel’s terrible scream rippled throughout

the grounds of Fernside Manor. Andrew could not see the guests, but there was no doubt in his mind that they had heard, and they would come in droves to find the source.

Dismayed, Frances looked toward the sound of hurried footsteps, coming closer with every second. She imagined there was not a soul within the entirety of the Chiltern Hills who had not heard that ear-splitting scream.

“Why do this before the wedding?” she growled at Lady Rachel. “Your quarrel is with me and Andrew, not with my sister and Lord Croxley. It is not as though we were getting married.”

Lady Rachel’s face contorted in a mask of raw anger. “What did you just call him?”

“His name,” Frances retorted, for what did she have to lose? The guests were coming, and nothing would divert them. The least she could do was land a blow of her own before Lady Rachel strove to crush her family’s reputation.

How will it appear to the guests? It can be explained away. Of course, it must be. I was not gifted with my way with words for nothing. Straightening up, Frances braced for the onslaught.

The very minute the first guests appeared around the corner of the grass opening, Lady Rachel unleashed hell. She collapsed to her knees, rocking in a display of despair, covering her face with her hands as she mustered the same crocodile tears that she had used to trick Frances, albeit briefly.

“Help me!” she wailed. “It is too awful! Please, will someone help me?”

A gentleman at the head of the incoming crowd rushed to Lady Rachel's side. He attempted to help her to her feet, but Lady Rachel became a dead weight, slumping back to the ground.

"What has happened?" A cry went up from the crowd; their numbers increasing moment by moment. Soon enough, every last guest upon the invitation list would be here to bear witness to Lady Rachel's stirring performance.

I must bide my time, Frances told herself, fighting the urge to jump straight into defensive action.

Lady Rachel pointed a trembling finger up at Frances. "I misunderstood the instructions for the day's events and thought the ceremony had already begun. I went to the chapel but found it empty, and... became lost on my return," she explained between dramatic sobs. "Then, I happened upon this wretched woman, unchaperoned with my betrothed. I... I... I s... saw her trying to kiss him!"

The guests erupted with collective outrage, transforming into a sea of appalled faces.

"She has been trying to steal him from Lady Rachel since the betrothal party!" someone shouted, sounding a great deal like Lady Georgiana.

Who keeps inviting these people? Frances cursed silently, for her time would come.

"I have seen her walk alone with him before!" another voice added. Harriet, no doubt. "She is a deceitful, improper witch, who would enchant any gentleman who dares look her in the eyes!"

Frances wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the statement but allowing herself to chuckle would do her no favors. The guests would see it is a sign that these lies were, in fact, the truth.

Lady Rachel delved deeper into her grief-stricken scene, tugging at her hair as though she were an old-fashioned mourner. Or, perhaps, she was simply trying to give some reason to her unkempt hair, for the tangled mess did not lend itself to someone who was of sound mind.

Unless that someone is me. Even coiffed, my hair will not do as it is told. Another urge to laugh seized Frances by the throat: her eyes bulging

in her battle to swallow the hilarity.

“She would take him from me,” Lady Rachel wept. “You saw her behavior with Lord Lea at the betrothal party. She is a fallen woman, seeking to save herself by casting her spell upon *my* betrothed. It is obvious that she had a dalliance with Lord Lea. Perhaps, she is with child, and would make my beloved take the blame!”

Frances’ desire to laugh vanished in the blink of an eye. How pathetic did someone have to be to continue using that thread of an excuse? Credence had to be given for the ingenuity in turning it around on her enemy, but that did not stop the anger that burned within Frances’ chest. Children were sacred; they were not an imaginary tool to be used to win a conflict that had already been lost.

She intended to say as much, when a small voice filtered through the congregation.

“That is untrue.” An equally small, meek figure pushed to the front, where she could be seen by everyone. “For those who do not know me; I am Lady Penelope, daughter to the Earl of Wexburgh. *I* was the one who swore Lady Frances to silence, but I will not be silent in the face of this dangerous libel.”

Even Lady Rachel looked stunned by the unexpected witness.

“Lady Frances had no dalliance with Lord Lea. Indeed, she is my savior, and if you would believe the word of this liar over her, then you are foolish,” Lady Penelope continued: her voice growing stronger. “Lord Lea attacked me that night. I had ventured outside to take a breath of fresh air, when he pounced. He dragged me into the walled garden, and I might have suffered a terrible fate if Lady Frances had not come running to my aid.”

The crowd mumbled to one another, visibly confused by this twist in the tale. Many of the guests had been present at the betrothal party and had made their own assessments of that night. As such, Lady Penelope’s testimony likely went against everything they had decided to believe.

“She wanted Lord Lea to sign a contract, declaring that he would never attempt to besmirch another young lady. That was why they were arguing upon the lawn, though that came after she had rescued

me from his clutches.” Lady Penelope took a nervous breath. “Lady Frances is one of the finest people I have the good grace to know. She is a champion of the vulnerable, and an advocate for what is right and just. Moreover, Lady Rachel is *not* the Duke’s betrothed, though she is desperate to have him.”

Lady Rachel turned purple with ire, jumping to her feet as if she meant to strike Penelope. Seeing what might unfold, Frances darted around Andrew and leaped forward, getting in the way of the blow that was intended for Penelope. The impact stunned Frances, as Lady Rachel’s fist connected with her temple.

“Lady Frances!” Three separate voices called out in unison. In a rush, Andrew, Penelope, and Emmeline, who had appeared out of nowhere, hurried to Frances’ side as the ensuing dizziness sent her crashing to the ground.

Andrew caught her before she hit the grass, sweeping her up into his arms. “Frances? My goodness, why did you do that?”

“For Lady Penelope,” Frances croaked, wincing as a blinding pain bounced back and forth between her temples.

Penelope clamped a hand to her mouth. “Oh, Lady Frances, you should not have done that. You have already done too much for me.”

“I cannot... abide anyone who... would hurt someone vulnerable,” Frances hissed through her teeth, closing her eyes against the sharp pain.

At that moment, Emmeline, adopting an expression of grim displeasure, turned to address the crowd. All the while, she held onto Frances’ hand, squeezing it for reassurance... though Frances did not know if it was supposed to reassure her or Emmeline.

“What is the meaning of this?” she shouted. “How dare you come here to my home and cast aspersions upon my sister, who has done nothing but endure your perpetual unkindness with a smile and a witty retort. Is it so easy to believe a cruel woman, instead, despite her having a history of telling tales to get what she wants?”

The guests dropped their gazes, looking tremendously sheepish.

Emmeline rounded on Lady Rachel, who had frozen where she stood, staring at her fist as if it did not belong to her. “You have done everything within your power to make my sister miserable because of your all-consuming jealousy. You saw an affection between her and His Grace, and you decided you would destroy her. Well, you will not succeed, for you are nothing but a despicable liar, and everyone here will know your true nature.”

“He is *my* Duke,” Lady Rachel panted. “We are betrothed. We were promised to one another. I am not jealous; I am protective of what is mine.”

Still cradling Frances in his arms, Andrew shot a dark look in Lady Rachel’s direction. “I will state, here and now, that no such promise was ever made. I have no betrothal agreement with Lady Rachel.” He glanced across the crowd. “Yes, it is true that Lady Frances and I were unchaperoned, but with forgivable reason. We were decorating the chapel, and there were no servants or other plausible chaperones to spare.”

The guests exchanged bemused looks, likely trying to figure out if they should be offended or forgiving. Considering what they had just seen Lady Rachel do, Frances hoped they could find it in themselves to lean more toward forgiveness.

“Indeed, the only thing Lady Rachel bore witness to was my proposal,” Andrew added, drawing a shocked gasp from Frances and the rest of the crowd. “I asked Lady Frances if she would be my wife. Lady Rachel overheard and, incensed, she decided to cause a scene because she realized she would never be a Duchess. That is the only thing driving this pathetic performance—spoiled greed.”

Frances turned inward, so the guests would not see her lips move. “What are you doing?”

“What I should have done in the forest,” he whispered back. “I love you, my dear Frances. I feared marriage, never pausing to consider that a marriage of true love could heal all my old wounds and chase away any bad memories of my father. Recently, I realized this, and though I intended to ask for your hand tomorrow, so I would not intrude upon your sister’s day, I hope you will consent to making me the happiest gentleman in England.”

Frances gaped at him. “Are you certain you were not the one who was punched in the face?”

“Quite certain,” he chuckled. “If you agree, I will spend the rest of my days making our life a happy one. I might stumble at times, but I am determined to be the perfect husband to you... if you will be my wife. Exactly as you are.”

She squinted. “You are not doing this out of a sense of duty for my reputation, are you?”

“I would protect your reputation, yes, but I had already planned to propose before this unpleasantness began,” he replied. She could see the honesty in his dark-blue eyes, and hear the earnest note in his soft, hopeful voice.

Jolted from her trance, Lady Rachel scowled at the couple. “There was no proposal. That is a vile lie, intended to make me look like a jealous madwoman!” She gazed out toward the guests, desperately searching for someone who might still believe her.

“There *was* a proposal,” Frances countered, letting her words carry across the gathered bodies, “and I agreed. The only reason we kept it quiet was for my sister, Lady Emmeline, for it is dire form to become engaged on someone else’s wedding day. Thanks to Lady Rachel, I am now a terrible sister, but I assure you all that I am no fallen woman.”

A nervous chuckle rippled through the crowd, coaxing a smile onto Frances’ lips. Even with a bruised temple and a surprise engagement, she still had her wit to save her.

Penelope clapped her hands together. “Let us cheer to Lady Frances and His Grace, the Duke of Reeves!”

“Please do!” Emmeline cried. “For now, my wedding day is doubly filled with love!”

At their permission, the guests exploded into enthusiastic applause and cheers. For once, Frances was the center of attention for a good reason, and she could not deny how wondrous it felt. Especially as she had an excellent excuse to remain in Andrew’s safe embrace, just as long as she kept wincing enough to remind the guests of her injury.

As the congratulations faded, Emmeline pointed a stern finger at Lady Rachel. "Might someone be so kind as to remove this rabblrouser from my wedding, so we can proceed with the ceremony?"

A couple of gentlemen stepped forward to volunteer, both of them taking hold of Lady Rachel's arms and marching her away from the coppice. Frances waited for the wretched woman to scream and flail and writhe in protest, but she did not. Instead, she slumped in their grip, until they had no choice but to drag her away in a most humiliating fashion.

"Let us venture to the chapel!" Emmeline called, gesturing for Peter to come and lead the guests. He had already seen her in her wedding gown, but they still deserved to meet one another at the altar, in the proper way.

Chattering loudly about the dramatic events, the crowd dutifully followed Peter through the forest, leaving Frances, Andrew, and Emmeline behind. Even the girls' mother and father went after Peter, likely understanding that the newly engaged couple might want a moment of privacy.

"Shall I see you at the chapel?" Emmeline asked her sister, placing a tender kiss upon her brow. "I would not blame you if you would prefer to return to the Manor, and have your bruise seen to."

Frances snorted. "I would not miss your wedding, even if Lady Rachel had broken my legs." She paused. "Might you delay until I get there, though, as there is something I would like to say to my... betrothed."

"I will wait for as long as it takes," Emmeline promised, casting a look up at Andrew. "You had best make her deliriously happy, Your Grace, or I shall be very displeased."

He nodded. "I will do all I can to keep a smile upon her face, every day of our lives together."

With that promise, Emmeline flashed a wink at her sister and hurried away, holding her skirts so she would not trip as she ran.

Alone again, Andrew peered down at Frances. "What did you wish to say? I hope it is not that you have changed your mind and agreed only to ensure that Lady Rachel was overcome."

In place of words, Frances took hold of his handsome face and pulled it down to meet hers. Her mouth grazed his in a searing, passionate promise of a wondrous future, and he did not hesitate to kiss her back in kind. After so many years of repelling the notion of marriage, Frances had not realized that there was freedom to be found in the institution. A freedom that allowed her to kiss this tremendous man, without fear of seeing her reputation destroyed.

In due course, she pulled away slightly, though she kept her hands to his face. "I love you, my dear Andrew."

"As I love you, my darling Frances," he whispered, kissing her again.

A month ago, if someone had told her that she would end Andrew's time at Fernside Manor as a betrothed woman, held in his arms, she would have laughed until her ribs ached. Yet, fate had a habit of working in mysterious ways, and, against all the odds, it had drawn two lost souls together, uniting them in what would soon become holy matrimony. Something neither had wanted, but both had found themselves desiring.

How wonderfully ironic— Frances smiled, for it could not have been a more fitting start to what she hoped would be a lifetime of unusual, exciting, blissful contentment.

"Shall we?" he asked, setting her down and taking hold of her hand.

She nodded. "Yes, I think we shall."

Epilogue

Three Months Later...

“Sister, you look... remarkable!” Emmeline cried, running up to Frances and throwing her arms around her. “You are a vision. Truly, you are.”

Frances chuckled and hugged her sister in return. “I hope that is the good kind of remarkable vision, and not the kind one might say in seeing a green cow in a field?”

“Of course it is the good kind!” Emmeline pulled away and swatted her sister lightly on the arm. “I thought you had agreed to accept compliments. I trust you are not breaking your promise already?”

Frances groaned, rolling her eyes. “I am doing my best, Emmy, but it is so very difficult to alter the habit of a lifetime. I cannot help but respond unfavorably.”

“Well, you must become accustomed to it, for everyone at the church is going to shower you with adulations!” Emmeline clapped her hands together excitedly, while Cariat looked on with friendly fondness. Truly, the lady’s maid had every reason to be proud, for she had done the impossible, wrangling Frances’ hair into smooth curls that had relented to being pinned.

Frances grimaced. “Then, I will not go.”

“You bloody well will!” Cariat interjected, as she stowed away the heated rod. “I haven’t spent hours of my life on your hair for you *not* to be showered with compliments!”

Emmeline smirked. "Precisely. You shall have to endure it for one day." She paused, her expression softening. "Are you nervous?"

"Not particularly. Is that a bad omen? Should I be nervous?" In truth, Frances was far more anxious than she cared to admit, but it had nothing to do with marrying Andrew. She would have preferred them to be wed in a small ceremony, with no one but family present. Her mother, on the other hand, had demanded a more extravagant affair.

"I never thought this day would come," she had bemoaned, upon hearing of Frances' wishes. "Would you deny me the precious pleasure of seeing my eldest become a Duchess?"

"I am not denying you that pleasure at all, Mother. *You* will see my wedding," Frances had replied, knowing full well what her mother actually meant.

"I mean, would you deny me the privilege of inviting all of our friends and acquaintances to witness such a momentous occasion," her mother had explained regardless, clearly unwilling to accept a refusal. In the end, Frances had given up, handing control over to her mother.

Emmeline adjusted one of the front curls of Frances' tamed, fiery hair. "It is not a bad omen, though I do believe you are fibbing. Did you sleep at all, last night?"

"Some," Frances lied, offering an apologetic glance to her lady's maid. "But Cariat is a sorceress with a pot of powder. You should have seen me before she attacked me with the puff. I looked like I should be attending my own funeral, rather than my wedding."

Cariat grimaced. "It is true." A peculiar expression took over her face. "Goodness, I hadn't even thought. I'll have to get used to calling you "Your Grace," once you're a Duchess and all."

"Nonsense. Continue to speak with me as you have always done. I am already going to be a reluctant Duchess, so I would prefer not to be reminded of my station every time I am getting dressed," Frances replied, with a note of pleading in her voice. Of course, she longed to be married to Andrew, but she had not quite realized what would be expected of her when she became the Duchess of Reeves.

"Will I be responsible for arranging balls and soirees and dinners?" she

had asked her beloved Andrew, while wandering the grounds of the Reeves Estate. The Hall was far larger than Fernside Manor, lacking the warmth and comfort of a smaller home, but there were woodlands to be explored and a very pleasant fishing lake, even if the landscape was annoyingly flat.

Andrew had chuckled. “Not at all, My Love. I told you, I do not expect anything of you. Yes, you will be a Duchess, but in title only. I do not care for social occasions, so there is no necessity for us to be the talk of Society.”

“I daresay we are that already,” Frances had replied, not believing that she would be allowed to shirk the duties of a Duchess. Still, she had the Dowager’s wealth of wisdom to help her, and she was already looking forward to spending more time with the old woman.

Just then, a knock came at the chamber door, and her mother entered without waiting for permission. She took one step and halted sharply, as if she were a marionette, and someone had just pulled on her strings.

“My goodness,” she gasped, staring at Frances.

Frances smiled. “Is it so very awful?”

“Whatever are you talking about?” her mother chided softly. “You look... exquisite. Cariad, you have done exceptional work. Why, if I had known you could look so refined, my darling, I would have urged Cariad to do this every time.”

Frances pulled a face. “I would have fled if you had even attempted such a command, Mother. Sitting in that chair for hours on end is a waste of time, especially when I could be walking Piglet and Eris in the forests.”

“I almost forgot!” Emmeline sprinted across the bedchamber and out into the hallway beyond. She returned a moment later, with the two bulldogs trailing after her, looking as miserable about their transformation as Frances had felt during her feat of beautifying endurance.

Still, they looked adorable. Piglet wore a cravat of dark-green silk, while Eris had been placed in a miniature replica of Frances’ sapphire-

blue gown.

“Who did that to you, my poor darlings?” Frances cried, stifling a burst of laughter as the bulldogs barreled toward her. She crouched down to smother them with affection, before noticing Emmeline’s crestfallen expression. “I am teasing, Emmy. They look marvelous. Andrew will be particularly delighted, for I am quite certain he loves these wondrous beasts more than he loves me.”

Much like the rest of their “courtship,” the aftermath of their unexpected engagement had been unusual. Instead of returning to Reeves Hall, Andrew had remained at Fernside Manor until the second set of banns had been announced. Just before the third, Andrew, Frances, Emmeline, Peter, and the Dowager traveled to Reeves Hall, where they had been ever since.

One day, Peter and Emmeline would move to Croxley Manor up the south-eastern coast, but they did not seem to be in any rush. It pleased Frances, for it meant the sisters would not be separated for a long time to come. She just wished they could transport the Chiltern Hills and her parents to Norfolk, and then everything would perfect.

“I heard news of Lady Rachel today,” the girls’ mother announced, taking a seat by the fireplace while Cariad added the final touches to the powder that Piglet and Eris had disturbed with their eager tongues.

Frances raised an eyebrow. “Who is the poor victim, this time?”

“No one,” her mother replied, looking satisfied, “though there will be ample opportunity where she is headed.”

Emmeline swooped in, perching on the armrest of her mother’s chair. “A nunnery?”

“Sadly not.” The girls’ mother smiled. “Her father is pursuing a business endeavor in the ‘New World’. They set sail just this morning, which is how I came to hear of it. There is nothing Mrs. Devin does not know, and I have not the faintest idea how she acquires her information.”

The cook had come to join the Reeves Hall staff for the duration of the wedding preparations, her presence providing juicy gossip to the

servants of the grand Estate... and those who should have known better, it seemed.

“Let us hope she finds peace there,” Frances said, rather generously. After all, there was no further reason for her to be bitter toward Lady Rachel. The wretched creature had garnered more than her fair share of punishment after word had spread of her unseemly antics on Emmeline and Peter’s wedding day.

From the very moment the wedding was over and the guests had returned to their respective homes, Society had exploded with the salacious news. Lady Rachel found herself plastered across every scandal sheet and “tattler” in England’s cities, with some versions of events far more dramatic than the truth.

As a result, she had been banished from every social occasion, and the cruel harpies who had reveled in joining Lady Rachel’s vengeful cause immediately abandoned her, in case they were tarnished by association. Almost overnight, Lady Rachel became persona non grata, ruining any chance she might have had of finding an agreeable husband.

Truth be told, Rachel, I feel sorry for you. I imagine I will for a long time to come. It was not in Frances’ nature to bear a grudge, and though there was no love between her and Lady Rachel, she still had sympathy to spare. Society would always punish ladies more harshly than gentlemen, as evidence by the fact that Lord Lea had not suffered any ill effects from his attack upon Penelope. Although, he had not been in the scandal sheets or in any rumors about disgraced ladies, so it appeared he was keeping to his contract.

“We ought to be leaving,” Frances’ mother announced, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Your Duke awaits you, my darling!”

Frances smiled. “He is not my Duke, Mother. He is my husband, or he will be.”

“Well, yes, but he is also your Duke.” Her mother could not hide her excitement, for it was not often that a daughter who seemed destined for spinsterhood found love with a gentleman of the highest station.

Emmeline rolled her eyes. “You know Franny is terrified of becoming a Duchess. Do not remind her of what she is entering into, or she may

abscond without warning.”

“You would not.” Their mother looked horrified, causing Frances to chuckle.

“No, I would not. I am more afraid of not being with Andrew than I am of... having to arrange balls.” She shuddered. “Perhaps, I will delegate such tasks to you, Mother.”

Her mother brightened. “Please do! I would relish the prospect.” She got up beckoning wildly. “Now, bring those unruly beasts and let us depart, before you are unfashionably late to your future.”

Scooping Eris up so she would not trip on her ungainly gown, while Piglet followed at her heel, Frances took a deep breath and headed out of the bedchamber. As long as Andrew was waiting at the church for her, there was nothing more to be scared of.



“I am so very proud of you, my boy,” Andrew’s mother adjusted his cravat and gave his cheek a gentle pinch. She had been fussing over him all morning, but he did not mind. It felt nice, in truth, especially as she had not stopped smiling.

He took hold of her hands and kissed them. “I am proud of you, Mother. I am proud of all of us for overcoming things that, by rights, should have crushed us to dust.” He released her hands. “I am prouder still of the affection that you and Frances have for one another. Truly, nothing has ever made me happier.”

“You fell in love with the rarest of ladies, my boy. I have never encountered anyone like her, and I daresay I never shall again, for she is as unique as she is marvelous,” his mother cooed, as Peter came running in.

“She is here!” he announced, bowing apologetically to the congregation. The church was packed from wall to wall with well-wishers, all of whom jostled with excited anticipation.

A moment later, before the organ had even begun to play, the church doors opened to reveal his beautiful bride. Attired in an elegant gown of sapphire blue, much like the one she had worn to that first

betrothal party, she could not have walked down the aisle any quicker without breaking into a run. Her father, positioned at her side, struggled to keep up.

Soft laughter whispered through the church; the congregation clearly endeared toward the bride's enthusiasm.

Before Andrew knew it, Frances was in front of him, peering through a gauzy veil. Her dark eyes, so strange and intense, fixed upon his. In that moment, a blanket of serenity settled over him, as it always did whenever she was near.

"You look magnificent," he whispered.

She beamed behind her veil. "You look rather nice yourself. Indeed, you are wearing the same cravat as Piglet."

"Are they here?" Andrew's eyes widened, for he had hoped they might be.

"They are waiting for us outside. The clergyman by the door barred their entry," she replied. "Spoilsport."

Without further ado, the reverend welcomed everyone to the ceremony, before diving straight into the vows and recitals. Andrew tried to be attentive, but with Frances next to him, he found it difficult to concentrate on anything but her. So much so that he nearly missed his moment to repeat his vows, inciting another ripple of laughter from the congregation.

All too swiftly, the formalities were concluded, and the reverend opened his arms. "I now pronounce you man and wife."

The church sparked into raucous appreciation, with the guests standing and applauding, while many more whooped and hollered their congratulations. Never in his life had Andrew expected to be at the center of a wedding that possessed so much love and warmth and promise, not only from the marrying couple but from those who had come to cheer on the union.

"I love you," he murmured to his beloved wife, peeling back her veil and gazing adoringly into her eyes.

“As I love you, my dearest husband,” she replied, smiling from ear to ear.

He grinned. “Why, do you have another, less dear husband?”

“Not that you know about,” she quipped in return, the two of them cackling as they turned and headed back up the aisle. Flanked the entire way by rapturous applause and sweet praise, they were both red with joy as they stepped out into the cool noonday sun. The chill of autumn soothed their happy heat, the falling leaves heralding the change of the season, and the glorious change in their lives.

Piglet and Eris, resting at the bottom of the church steps, perked up at the sight of their mistress and adopted master. They hurried up the stairs, where they were swiftly swept up into the arms of the bride and groom.

There, settled in their peculiar band of four, Andrew leaned down to kiss his wife, while the bulldogs licked the new Duke and Duchess with a giddy frenzy. Frances kissed him back, smiling against his lips as the dogs tried to wriggle closer.

“Do you remember that I once said I thought the Ancient Egyptians were mistaken about those with red hair?” he said, pulling away slightly.

Frances nodded. “I do.”

“Well, now I am convinced they were wrong.” He kissed her again, grateful with every fiber of his being that he had found the courage to leave his past behind him. With her, his father’s ghost was not strong enough to haunt him any longer. Her presence, her light, her humor, her love, had already chased away much of the empty darkness of Reeves Hall, and he could not wait to build a life with her, free of the shackles of his heavy memories.

“Still, you should protect your neck,” she whispered mischievously, dipping her head to place a kiss there.

He chuckled, enjoying the sensation. “If you are a vampire, my dear Frances, then you have my permission to turn me into one. That way, I would be granted an eternity with you, instead of one mortal life.”

“In that case, I believe we will have to make every day count, My Love,” she urged, leaning into him. “And I look forward to each and every one.”

He stole one last kiss before the congregation came out to interrupt. “As do I, My Darling. As do I.”

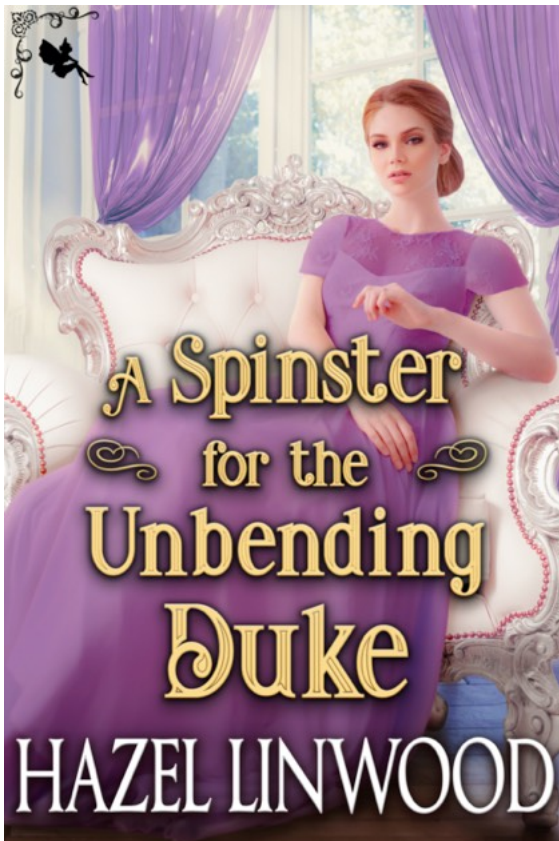
Indeed, nothing had ever been sweeter than the prospect of a long and joyful future at her side, exactly as they were, where no ghosts could ever catch them.

Extended Epilogue

Would you like to know how **Frances and Andrew's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link:
<https://go.hazellinwood.com/SWSftCPt> directly in your browser.

I guarantee you, that you won't be disappointed ♥



Preview: To Love the Scars of a Duchess

“Can you believe it, Anne? By this time tomorrow, you and I

will be riding our horses across the brook and into the hills near Calford. How are we supposed to sleep tonight when such an exciting event is to take place?” Dorothy asked her cousin, smiling at the other girl’s reflection in the looking glass as they readied for bed.

Anne frowned. “What if my horse isn’t gentle? Some of them can be rather frightening, you know.”

“I’m sure Father selected the perfect ones for us. I know he made several trips to different farms to see about them, so they are most certainly very tame and not quick to startle.”

Dorothy continued brushing out her long chestnut curls until they gleamed, just as her mother’s lady’s maid had showed her. She hurried to plait them into two braids and put on her sleep cap.

“My mother still thinks I’m too young to be permitted to ride,” Anne said, her expression still rather concerned. “Do you think that’s true?”

“I don’t wish to contradict Aunt Miriam, but I cannot agree. Mother and Father would never have permitted it if I was too young. And your father made the arrangements for Father to purchase your horse at the same time as mine so they would know each other well,” Dorothy explained slowly. “Surely if your father thinks it’s acceptable, then there’s no reason for your mother to disagree, right?”

“That may be the way of things in this house,” Anne said wistfully, “but at home, Mother is always at odds with Father. I think half of the time he only does the opposite of what she demands just so he can be contrary.”

“That can’t be right, Anne. They are married, after all,” Dorothy replied innocently, her eyes bright. “That must mean they love each

other, even if you do not see it all the time.”

“Do you think so? Mother rarely speaks of these things, but when she makes mention of it, I somehow think she doesn’t even like Father.”

“What’s not to like? He’s a little bit old to be a father, but that just makes him even more jolly,” Dorothy said, smiling to cheer up her cousin. “And your mother is still so beautiful, even if she’s old enough to have a son the age your brother is.”

“I suppose that could be true,” Anne said, though Dorothy couldn’t tell if she was sincere.

“Come on. I’m going to tell Mother goodnight, then we shall go to bed. I want to be up early in the morning so that we might have our breakfast and meet these beautiful horses!”

“I haven’t brushed my hair yet. Mother insists on one hundred strokes every morning and every night,” Anne explained, reaching for the silver brush on Dorothy’s little table in the closet. “I’ll wait for you here.”

Dorothy nodded happily and left her bedroom, skipping down the long hallway to the stairs that would take her to the stairs leading to the third floor where her parents’ suite was situated. She hurried along the next hallway to the farthest corner of the immense house, the plush Persian runner tickling the bottoms of her bare feet.

At the proper door, Dorothy raised her hand and knocked three times with her right hand, two with her left, and then once with her right. It was a little game she always played with her mother, one that they had invented two summers ago when Dorothy had taken ill with a fever and could not leave her bed.

“Come in, my darling girl!” a high, muffled voice called from the other side of the door.

Dorothy turned the latch and pushed the heavy door open, then slipped inside and shut it again. She turned and saw her mother sitting in a chair near the fireplace, her feet stretched out in front of her on a low stool.

“Is it too late, Mother?” Dorothy inquired.

“Not at all, your father is still downstairs in his study, meeting with the Earl of Waverly, darling. Here, come sit by me,” Lady Forbes said in her musical lilt, setting aside her book and sliding over to one side of her chair, patting the cushion beside her.

Dorothy hurried over and nestled in the crook of her mother's arm, letting the woman wrap her shawl around her. She breathed in the faint but familiar scent of her mother's rose water, smiling to herself as it elicited memories of sitting together. It was the aroma of hours spent reading or doing needlework, or her mother perched beside her on the bench at the pianoforte, teaching her patiently.

"Why, Dorothy, I never cease marveling at how beautiful you are. Just the sight of you makes my heart leap. But can't you sleep, dear girl?" her mother asked kindly.

"Not at all. I'm much too excited about seeing my horse tomorrow. I've waited so long," Dorothy said, breathing a happy sigh. Her forehead creased with worry. "Anne says we're too young to be permitted to ride, though. Her mother is not happy that Father arranged for us to have them."

"Never fear, Dorothy. Though you are almost two years older than Anne, you are both perfectly capable of learning. Besides, the master of horse will accompany you both and your father will be there as well. I'm sure there will be a great many lessons before you're permitted to ride off the grounds or gallop across the countryside on your own. Peter has promised me that they are the gentlest horses to be found in any stable around."

Dorothy sat up, turning to look at her mother. "Why do you call father by his name, instead of 'Lord Forbes' or 'the Earl?' Those are how Aunt Miriam speaks of her husband."

Lady Forbes' happy expression faltered briefly as she brushed a strand of hair back from Dorothy's face.

"Different people have different ways about them. Your father and I are very fortunate in that we have loved each other from the moment we met. He is not only my loving husband and my dear lord: he is also my very best friend. But that is not the case for every marriage, and some couples choose to follow more formal conventions for how they speak to each other."

"Oh. Does that mean Anne's parents do not love each other?" Dorothy asked, her question more of a horrified whisper than childlike curiosity.

"Oh no, that's not what it means at all," her mother said, but Dorothy thought there was something odd about the way her mother had answered. "Remember, Anne's mother is my sister. She is just in a marriage that is... a little unlike mine, that is all."

“Because Lord Arnold is so old, you mean?” the girl asked, looking up at her mother with wide eyes.

“We mustn’t say that to anyone else,” Lady Forbes said quietly. “But yes. It is true, Lord Arnold is a good deal older than Aunt Miriam. And that can make it difficult to feel like very close friends, you see. Lord Arnold is nearly as old as your grandfather, Miriam’s and my father.”

“Why would she want to marry a man who is so old as that?”

“Well, it was not entirely her decision. Anne is the oldest daughter, and our parents had no sons. So our father had to choose very carefully when selecting a husband for her. The Earl of Arnold was in a very good position to marry her,” Lady Forbes explained slowly.

“I should not want to marry someone so old as that,” Dorothy admitted, looking ashamed for stating it so plainly. “I would want to marry someone who is my friend, too, just like you and Father.”

Lady Forbes pulled her daughter closer and kissed the top of her hair. “And I’m certain you shall. Whenever the day comes that you are ready to marry, your father will approve only the most wonderful man for you to meet. Of course, I will be at your side for your Season, and I should think you will be clever enough to know a good man from one who is... well, not so wonderful as your father.”

“What if I don’t want to marry? What if I want to stay with you and Father forever?” Dorothy asked, her chin quivering suddenly at the unhappy thought of leaving her family.

Her mother looked at her lovingly, taking Dorothy’s face in her hands. “I should not want that for you, my dear girl. I want all the happiness in the world to be yours. And in my mind, that includes a wonderful husband and the most amazing children a woman could hope for—precisely as I have. But if that is your choice, then you must stop taunting your little brother so that he permits you to stay here at Evergreen Hall when he is someday the Earl of Forbes.”

Dorothy frowned. “I only taunt him because he starts teasing me first.”

Lady Forbes laughed. “You and Anne torment him relentlessly. But that is because you are both so very funny. Come, I’ll take you back to bed and read to both of you for a while. I’m so glad her parents permitted you to have her as your friend to stay with you this month.”

Dorothy stood up to follow her mother, but then was struck with a flash of inspiration. She hurried around in front of her mother and looked up at her hopefully. “Do you think Anne could stay with us

next month, too?"

"I don't know about that, I'm afraid. The Season will start in June, and we will all return to London well before then," her mother explained, seemingly disappointed herself. "Even though you are not old enough to attend these events, your father and I will have a number of obligations through the summer. I'm sure Anne's parents also will need time to prepare."

"All the more reason for her to stay, Mother!" Dorothy protested happily. "That way, she would not be in her mother's way. And Anne and I could amuse ourselves while you and Father are busy preparing to take our household to London. We could perhaps even keep Thomas out of your way. Right?"

Lady Forbes narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but she smiled nonetheless. "We shall see. I will speak first to your father and then write to Aunt Miriam. Perhaps don't say anything to Anne just yet, as we wouldn't want to get her hopes up until we know she has permission to remain here."

"Of course, Mother. Thank you!" Dorothy cried, throwing her arms around her mother's waist and holding her tightly. She pulled back in alarm almost at once. "Mother, look!"

Dorothy pointed to the fireplace. To her amazement, heavy tendrils of flames had already begun to lick at the rug and the curtains on either side. Even now, plumes of thick, black smoke drifted above the mantel. Lady Forbes shrieked in fear.

"It's impossible, how could the fire spread so quickly?" she cried. "Hurry, Dorothy, get out of here!"

As she was bidden, Dorothy hurried over to the door and pulled the latch only to find that it held fast. She pounded her fist on the handle several times, but the lock refused to turn.

"Mother, it's locked!" she cried, moving aside as soon as her mother raced over and tried it for herself.

"It can't be, it must only be stuck somehow," Lady Forbes said, trying it for herself. When it refused to open, she began to pound on the door with her fists and cry out. "Dorothy, keep calling for help, I shall try to smother the flames."

Dorothy continued to beat the door as hard as she could, turning to watch her mother in fear as Lady Forbes darted into the bedchamber and returned with her heavy coverlet. She slapped at the flames with

the long tail of the blanket, but it seemed that they only spread farther with every strike.

“Mother, your gown!” Dorothy cried out before rushing forward and attempting to extinguish the flames that crept up Lady Forbes’ hem. The pain was the worst she had ever known, but she would not stop.

The harder they tried to fight the flames, the more relentless their enemy became. The smoke now hung in the air, filling the room despite Lady Forbes’ decision to throw open the windows and permit it to escape. The curtains crackled ominously as they burned, and the fire that had consumed the rug had now reached the chairs on either side of the fireplace.

“Help!” Lady Forbes called out at the door before crossing over to an open window and repeating her plea, hoping that someone outside might hear.

“Mother, what shall we do?” Dorothy asked, the panic rising up in her as her body was shaken by brutal coughing.

“Do not fear, my dear girl. Someone will help us soon,” Lady Forbes replied, reaching for her daughter and wrapping her arms around her even as the smoke burned their lungs. “It will be all right, you’ll see.”

Chapter 1

Dorothy placed the last gown carefully in the trunk and closed the lid, then looked around her enormous room. Her lady's maid hovered nearby, looking anxious.

"There, I should think that's the last of the clothes, Winnie," Dorothy told her. "Is the trunk for my bonnets here yet?"

"It is, my lady. The footman brought it up and left it outside the door. I'll run and fetch it, though I do wish you'd let me pack your things," Winnie replied.

"I couldn't possibly leave all this work to you," she answered, dropping to her hands and knees to peer beneath the bed in search of any slippers that might have been lost. "I despise the thought of even traveling to London, let alone spending an entire Season there. You shouldn't have to do all the preparations."

"Thank you, my lady. But it's what I'm here for," Winnie reminded Dorothy kindly. "I'll be back in a moment."

The maid hurried out of the bedchamber and passed through the comfortable sitting room to retrieve the trunk. She returned several moments later, the enormous trunk obscuring her view.

"Here, let me help!" Dorothy called out, taking one of the handles on the side. "I'd never forgive myself if you stumbled and fell."

"You're too kind, my lady. But if you don't mind my asking, this trunk is even larger than the one for your gowns. What do you need so many bonnets for?"

"You sound exactly like my father when he sees the milliner's bill," Dorothy chided, though she was laughing. She turned serious and looked away before confessing, "I've never told him—nor anyone else

—the reason for my fondness for these silly trappings, either. The brims of these bonnets help to hide my face.”

Silence hung between them for a moment, and Dorothy knew it was because her maid did not know how to answer. Finally, the other woman spoke.

“My lady, you’re going to make me cry,” she said, clearly heartbroken at Dorothy’s explanation. “And as long as I’m being too forward today, I might as well have my say—I’ve seen how you hide your scars whenever you can. My lady, they are not so horrible as you must think them to be!”

“I know, Winnie,” Dorothy said softly. “They’re worse.”

The maid gasped in despair, but Dorothy continued. “Every time I permit myself to forget about these burns, the endless red welts that have marred my body, something happens to remind me all over again. The cruelest part is it will happen when I’m having a lovely day. Perhaps I’ve gone for a walk and am enjoying the sunshine, only to have a farm hand recoil in horror. Or I’m down in the village and going to the bookseller’s shop, only to have a child scream in fright when she catches sight of me.”

“My lady, please don’t... I can’t bear to know how you’re hurting,” Winnie whispered, clasping her hands together painfully to keep them from trembling.

“It’s all right, Winnie. I’ve come to accept them. These scars are my never-ending reminder of my mother and how much she loved me, of how she died shielding me from the smoke with her very own body. Others may find me hideous, but I know that at least she loved me enough to die for me,” Dorothy explained. She took a deep breath to stem the welling of tears in her eyes and said brightly, “But now you know why I own so many hats!”

Winnie giggled in spite of herself. “You have the purest soul of any person I’ve ever met, my lady. Perhaps these scars do show, but I think your appearance is far eclipsed by your wonderful spirit. And now that I have said far too much, I shall personally pack your bonnets—every last one of them! And if they will not all fit, I shall order a new trunk to be built in the village!”

“Thank you, Winnie,” Dorothy said, smiling. “But I fear the largest trunk is yet to be brought up as I need that one for all of my books.”

“You’re going to London for the Season, and you’re bringing along books?” Winnie asked, almost sneering at the ridiculousness of it.

"It is not my Season, it is Anne's," Dorothy reminded her. "With any luck, I shall not have to attend too many events. I shall be content to sit in the library and read while others flit about at parties and operas. But if you'll see to these hats, I'll see to Father and Thomas and ensure that they have also packed their things."

Winnie curtsied and moved to the great armoire that housed all of the many bonnets, leaving Dorothy to go downstairs. She couldn't help herself; every time she passed the hallway that had once led to her mother's rooms, she glanced that way and whispered a tiny greeting.

"Good day, Mother. I miss you," she whispered to the empty hallway automatically as she continued past.

"Ah, there you are, Dorothy," Lord Forbes called out when she reached the bottom stair. "Can you help me decide on this coat? Langley was no help at all as he refused to say anything unkind. He promised that it still fits me well enough, but don't you think it has gotten a little too tight around the middle?"

Dorothy glanced at the butler behind her father and smirked at the man's uneasy expression. The butler merely looked away, unwilling to be put in such an awkward position.

"I agree with you, Father. It almost looks as though it is Thomas' coat," she answered, frowning. "Here, turn this way."

Lord Forbes turned around and Dorothy looked inside the collar. "It is just as I thought. This one is not even your coat, Father! I dare say that if we were to go to Thomas' rooms, we would find your coat at the bottom of his trunk."

"Oh dear. I think you're right. He and I were up late last evening discussing the price of timber, and he must have taken my coat when he went up to bed," Lord Forbes said, shaking his head at his own foolishness. "I swear, it feels as though a little more of my mind goes missing with every passing day."

"That's not true, Father," Dorothy protested earnestly. "You were merely engaged in very important business matters. Anyone could have made the mistake."

Lord Forbes looked down at his feet for a moment. "I think it might be more than that, my dear. I fear... I do not want to go to London."

Dorothy reached for her father's hand and held it tightly, knowing what he would say.

"I understand, Father. Nor do I, if I'm being honest. But Anne needs me, and I've given my word that I would chaperone her this Season now that she is to be married. And it is important for Thomas to attend these events as well. He is coming up in the world of business and should seek a bride in the next few years, and as such he must be out among the *ton*. As much as it grieves me to say so, we cannot hide here in Evergreen forever."

"And who knows," her father added, forcing himself to appear cheerful, "perhaps you will meet a wonderful gentleman, too."

"Now Father, we have discussed this. I am content to live out my days caring for you," Dorothy stated firmly, ignoring the most obvious reason for arguing—that no man would ever be able to look past her scarred face and hands. "And when Thomas is an old man, I'm certain his wife will be glad of my company and my help in running her household."

"You sell yourself too short, daughter," the Earl said softly, placing the palm of his hand lovingly on her cheek. "I am certain there exists a man who is worthy of your beautiful heart. And should we find him, you will have my immediate approval, whether he is a duke or a blacksmith. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father," Dorothy said, though she knew her agreement was only to ease her father's grief. "Come, let us find your wayward coat so we can finish the packing. We leave early in the morning."



Though it was not even noon and the month of May was not even half over, Richard Green thought the heat felt brutal. It could have more to do with the ludicrous way he was dressed, he realized—full shirt, vest, coat, and hat, simply to stand about outdoors and nodded politely at people.

What a senseless waste of time, he thought, sighing deeply.

He knew his black mood had not been brought on merely by the steamy weather. While he stood with his best friend, Lord Elkins one gaggle after another of eligible young ladies had stared him down, followed by even more frightening gaggles of their mothers.

"How does it feel to be a wanted man?" Ralph had asked behind his gloved hand as one young lady dared to bat her eyes at him as she walked by.

"I would rather be wanted by the constable," Richard replied dryly. "These pointless outings only serve to remind me how the cornered mouse must feel before the cat pounces."

"If it's any consolation, it's not the mouse they're after but the cheese," Ralph joked, causing Richard to cut his eyes at him. "I'm serious, Clark. A duke with such a sum as you have? You're walking 'round with a target on your back."

"And here's the deadliest marksman of them all," Richard said in a low voice, instinctively turning his shoulder to attempt to conceal himself.

It was not to be.

"Good day to you, Your Grace," a sultry voice said, causing Richard to turn back.

"Ah. Lady Sally. Forgive me, I did not see you approaching. How lovely you look today," Richard said, bowing slightly as the young lady curtsied. He addressed her mother next, saying, "And I'm very glad to see that you are the picture of good health, Lady Brynn."

"I was just telling Mother that I was certain you would not be attending Lord Arnold's ball tomorrow evening as that sort of thing bores you terribly," Lady Sally said, her words dripping slowly from her mouth as she spoke in a haughty tone. "But Mother insists that you would never pass up an opportunity to pass the evening with so many delightful people. Which is it, Your Grace? You must tell us which of us knows you better."

Richard paused. He was trapped. He had to either admit that he had no interest in attending—thus hurting Ralph's feelings, as Ralph was the future son-in-law to Lord Arnold—or confess that he would be there. That revelation would prompt Lady Sally to spread the word that he had specifically promised her that he would attend.

He could not win.

"How could I ever pit mother against daughter and still call myself a gentleman?" Richard asked comically, discovering his escape. "I suppose you will just have to wait and see tomorrow evening."

Lady Brynn laughed happily, as though Richard had made some sort of marvelous game of flirting. Lady Sally, for her part, glared at him fiercely for but a brief second before joining her mother's gleeful reaction.

"Well then, I shall discover the answer tomorrow night. I shall not

sleep tonight for worrying over it,” Lady Sally said, her soft cupid’s bow lips protruding slightly in a pout. “Perhaps I won’t go myself, for it would be too much of a heartache to get my hopes up and not find you there.”

“I mustn’t be the reason that you do not enjoy yourself, Lady Sally. How would I ever live with myself? Besides, what are all the other men of the *ton* to do if the glittering swan of the Season does not make an appearance?” Richard asked innocently. “I dare say, they may cause a riot in protest of your absence.”

That seemed to delight both Sally and her mother, the Countess of Brynn. They exchanged triumphant smiles before turning back to Richard.

“Will you promenade with us, Your Grace?” the countess asked politely. Lady Sally looked confident in his answer.

“I am most sorry, but I must decline,” Richard answered, causing the ladies’ faces to fall. Lord Elkins and I are waiting for someone who is to meet us here.”

“We are?” Ralph asked, finally paying attention once more and floundering to cover his gaffe. “Oh, yes. Lady Anne. I am to meet her here within the hour.”

“Lady Anne? But she is at the modiste,” Lady Sally protested. “I saw her going in as I was leaving before coming here. She told me she would there for quite some time as she was having two gowns fitted for the ball tomorrow.”

“Imagine, two gowns for the same ball,” Lady Brynn said, rolling her eyes and fanning herself as though the very idea had given her a flush. “What are we to do, retire to the terrace while she changes her garments?”

“Mother,” Sally hissed sharply, but it was too late.

“I assure you, Lord Elkins’ *betrothed* must have a very good reason for ordering two gowns,” Richard said rather icily.

“She does indeed,” Ralph said forcefully. “Her cousin is coming from their estates in the north, and Lady Anne was worried the young lady wouldn’t have anything suitable given that it will be her first day in the city in quite some time. The second gown is for her cousin and dearest friend, Dorothy.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but Mother did not mean her comment as it must have sounded,” Lady Sally insisted, fluttering her eyelashes and

smiling endearingly. "It's this terrible heat, it only caused her to forget that Lady Anne is your fiancée."

"I see. No harm intended then," Ralph said, clearly still perturbed. "Ladies, if you will excuse me, I think I shall go and wait over there. I will speak with you later, Clark."

After a curt bow, Ralph strode in the opposite direction from where Richard was now ensnared.

"Oh dear, I do hope he was not too insulted. I did not mean any harm, I was only speaking in jest," Lady Brynn said lightly.

Lady Sally waved her hand dismissively. "He'll be all right. One cannot be too sensitive when speaking casually. Isn't that right, Your Grace? As you are now standing alone, why don't you walk with us?"

In his friend's absence, Richard had no plausible excuse to decline, at least not one that was polite. He inclined his head slightly in agreement and gestured for them to lead the way.

Lady Sally and her mother walked proudly the length of the park, nodding benevolently somehow to the people who acknowledged them. Behind them, Richard's countenance was less than proud. He felt every bit as though he were being dragged through the streets, put on display on a farmer's wagon as though he were the prized sow. He could already hear the chatter of voices that would follow him now that he had been seen publicly with Lady Sally.

"Your Grace, I was just telling Mother that summer weddings might be all the fashion at the moment, but that I think autumn is much better suited. What do you think?" Lady Sally asked innocently.

"I'm sorry, but I must confess that I have not given any thought to marriage, certainly not to the wedding ceremony itself," he replied, his pulse racing now that he knew her designs.

"But if you were to envision such an event—perhaps attending as the groom's witness—would you prefer it to be in the summer or the autumn?" she pressed.

"If I were to be merely the witness, then my opinion would not be required," he answered, forcing himself to sound cheerful in spite of the gravity of the topic. "Take -Mr. Elkins for instance. He is to be married at the end of the Season, and I was not consulted in the slightest as to whether or not the date would please me."

"That is because he did not select the date either," Lady Brynn said, scoffing. "His betrothed's family would do so, and Lady Anne's mother

would see to all of the celebrations. - Mr. Elkins has one task—arrive on time in the proper attire. That is all anyone can expect of a groom in the first place.”

“That and to make the offer of marriage to begin with, I should think,” Richard said, watching Sally’s profile.

It was as he suspected. Her giddiness at his mention of the very word caused her to smile like some sort of predator, pleased with the results of the hunt. Her mother shared her happiness with a sly grin of her own, then just as quickly as they had become elated, their expressions turned placid once more.

“And is Your Grace entertaining thoughts of offering marriage to anyone?” Lady Brynn inquired, her voice rising in pitch as she sought to remain nonchalant.

“I might be, now that you bring it up,” he replied, still toying with Lady Sally.

“I would think Your Grace should not tarry too long. With the Season now here and the marriage market rather thin this year, the object of a man’s desires may fall into someone else’s hands,” she continued. Richard noticed that she nudged Lady Sally, but she did not say anything else.

“I will have to ponder those words very carefully,” Richard acknowledged with a quick nod. “But now if you’ll excuse me, I must be on my way. I have a great many things to attend to if I am to spend my evenings in social pastimes. Ladies.”

He bowed slightly and turned away, leaving them standing to watch him go. He thought for a moment that he heard Lady Sally speak, something to the effect of expecting a marriage proposal any day now, but he couldn’t be sure.

The carriage swayed endlessly as Dorothy rode to London with her father and brother. It made it difficult at times to keep her attention on her book, especially at the times when the wheel bounced over a stone or slipped into a rut in the road. Still, she did her best to keep her eyes to the page, unwilling to miss even a moment of the adventure between the covers.

“Father, do tell her once more how she will ruin her eyes reading so much,” Thomas said, though Dorothy knew he was teasing and not chastising her.

“I shall do no such thing. Your sister is a young woman of words, and I shan’t be surprised if she has read every book we own,” Lord Forbes said proudly, patting her knee.

“I think I might have,” Dorothy confessed without looking up. “That is the only reason I look forward to this trip. I shall visit every bookseller in the city before we return to our sanctuary in the north.”

“Not I,” Thomas argued happily. “I’ve written to my friend from school. McDowell has promised to take me everywhere in London. I have spent plenty of years shut up in a schoolroom or our house. I cannot wait to traipse about the city and see new things.”

“I have ample new things in these books, if you would care to borrow them. Fantastical inventions and machines, sagas set in unbelievable locations, all the wonders of the scientific world,” she began, looking up just long enough to paint the image in her brother’s mind, “and of course, tales of the everyday and mundane, the stories of daily life throughout the empire. It offers more than enough entertainment and intrigue for me.”

“That’s because you have a mind that is keen for science and exploration,” Thomas said, and Dorothy detected a hint of admiration

in his voice. “Meanwhile, I got stuck with the mind of a dullard, one who could barely pass all of his levels at school. It’s a shame really, we should have been born with each other’s heads upon our shoulders.”

Dorothy laughed. “Would the face have to come, too? I cannot think how you’d look so fetching in a gown with your masculine features. And of course, you would be burdened with my—”

She stopped. Turning her attention out of the carriage window, Dorothy waited until the awkwardness in the carriage dissipated like morning fog.

“I’m sorry, I did not mean to sound as though I’m feeling sorry for myself. I really only meant the notion of switching our heads atop our own garments would be comical,” Dorothy said softly, then cleared her throat.

“I know what you meant, dear sister,” Thomas said, leaning forward slightly to look her in the eye. “But this is a marvelous occasion, don’t you see? This is the first time I can recall that you’ve been able to laugh about your features, or to forget for a moment that they do not look the same as most other people’s. It means you are making peace with it, and I applaud you for it wholeheartedly!”

“Thank you, Thomas. That is very kind of you, and yes, it did feel good to forget it for a few moments at least,” Dorothy acknowledged with a tearful smile. “And perhaps I am only feeling sorry for myself. I’ve never had to go out in public in such a way as this before.”

“What way would that be, daughter?” Lord Forbes questioned, sounding concerned.

“Oh, you know how it is when people have social events,” she said dismissively. “Anne has written to me so many times over the years of this party or that, what everyone was wearing, how they’ve styled their hair and whatnot. One’s appearance seems to be paramount to anything else about them, more than their character or their nature. I’m only feeling put out that I am to be thrown to the lions who judge everyone by their beauty first, their humanity second.”

“Dorothy, there is nothing to fear,” Lord Forbes promised. “Your brother and I will be at these events, as will Lady Anne and her family. And it should not upset you that word will spread about your terrible accident and your injuries. Everyone will be understanding when they remember that horrible day.”

Lord Forbes coughed and looked away for a moment, and Dorothy

knew he hated to speak of it. His grief was not only for his beloved wife, but for the future that was stolen from Dorothy when the fire burned her nearly beyond recognition.

"I'm sorry for making you think of it once more, Father," she said, putting her hand on his.

"Never fear, girl, you did not do it," he assured her with a weak smile. "There is not a day that goes by that I don't remember it."

"Then that is my wish for you, for all of us," Dorothy said, sitting up straighter. "It is as Thomas said. For only a moment, I'd forgotten to be unhappy about how I look. From now on, we shall all put it behind us. Mother's loss was a terrible thing, but she would want us to be happy. And though she often told me how beautiful I was, I am certain that in her boundless love for me, she would still find me pretty."

"And not only because you are a lovely person, Dottie, but because she loved us so much," Thomas said firmly, nodding in agreement. "But you are right. No more sadness, no more wasting our days with thoughts of such silliness as what others think of our appearance."

Dorothy nodded, but she knew all too well that such promises were easily made and easily broken. It was not so taxing to ignore others' opinions when she was at home in Evergreen Hall, but London was an entirely different scenario. These were strangers, for the most part, and she knew they would have no tie to her. Even if they chanced to remember her mother, it did not mean they would be so accepting of her.

It also did not mean they would be kind.

But the characters in my books cannot see my face, nor do they know of my sadness, Dorothy thought as she turned back to the volume in her lap. *They are my truest friends, and they will never desert me.*

"You must be excited to see Lady Anne again after all this time," Lord Forbes said, pointedly changing the subject.

"I am. She writes to me faithfully, such glorious letters that I feel as though I have lived her entire lifetime alongside her," Dorothy said, feeling the first surge of gladness since their journey began. "It will be good to visit with her, even if it means being gone from Evergreen for such a long time."

"A single summer is not such a long time as that," her father said, still struggling to sound cheerful. "It will pass far too quickly and be over

before you know it. Only remember to make the best of it and let it fill you with fond memories.”

Their carriage ride mercifully ended, and Dorothy, Thomas, and Lord Forbes entered their London house. For her part, Dorothy could not remember ever setting foot in it since the fire, as the home was filled with memories of her mother, memories that were too painful for any of them to bear until now. The servants had gone ahead of them and readied the rooms, and Dorothy noticed that there were almost no reminders of her mother in sight other than a lone portrait that hung in the foyer.

It is both kind of them and cruel, Dorothy thought as she saw new things scattered about the house to replace ones that might have brought back a wave of sadness. *Kind of them to ease our pain as best they could, cruel to erase Mother’s presence by merely whisking away her trinkets and touches.*

It was not to be the worst heartache Dorothy suffered that day as she wandered the halls and peered in the rooms of the immense house.

“Father, you’re still coddling her,” Thomas said, his voice muffled by the door to her father’s office. Frowning with concern, Dorothy tiptoed closer and listened. “All the way to London, you led her to believe that she could just do as she pleases. But it isn’t true!”

“Of course it’s true!” her father protested, though he sounded more tired than combative. “If your sister does not wish to marry, then that is her decision and we will both abide by it.”

“Does not wish to? Or did you mean she is afraid to?” Thomas asked, and Dorothy felt a stab of betrayal in her heart. What did he ever know of the fear of rejection?

“What does it matter?” Lord Forbes countered patiently. “Whether it is her wish or her lack of confidence in herself, the result is the same. She is unmarried at the age of three-and-twenty, and that is unlikely to change. Nor will I force her to.”

Thank you, Father, Dorothy thought as Lord Forbes stood by her.

“That is only because you will not push her from the nest like a mother bird leading its young to fly,” Thomas said, words that Dorothy found both an apt description and vaguely insulting. “As I said, you’ve coddled her to the point that she fears even walking past a looking glass, let alone going out and meeting people.”

“Meeting suitors, you mean,” her father said almost accusingly. “You

are so determined that she marry—”

“And you are both so determined that she cannot, for some reason,” Thomas interrupted.

“—and I cannot help but think it is your own selfish desire not to be saddled with her when I am gone,” Lord Forbes finished.

Their father’s words must have stunned Thomas with guilt, for he did not speak for several moments. Dorothy held her breath as she waited to hear the outcome of their argument about her.

“How is she ever to meet a man worthy of her when she will not leave that blasted library and her books? And when you will not encourage her to do so?” Thomas asked, his voice filled with raw emotion.

Dorothy’s emerald-green eyes pooled with tears. Thomas did love her! It was not his resentment but his devotion to her that made him so cross!

“And what will I do with a daughter whose heart has been broken by rejection or ridicule? What then, Thomas?” Lord Forbes begged. “You will be off in your house somewhere with a wife and children, while Dorothy and I sit with our solitude and misery, staring at the walls in between speaking about the weather. I cannot bear it. Her life must be happy, else I have no reason to go on.”

“But Father, what you are describing is the very future that you’ve condemned her to if you do not encourage a match!” Thomas insisted, his voice rising in volume to match his sense of urgency. “If you will not do your part in seeking a husband for it, I will do it myself.”

“Are you certain this is not only your desire to be unencumbered?” Lord Forbes snapped at his son.

“How could you think such a thing of me? I beg you, Father, to remember that not only was my sister scarred that day, but I lost my mother as well. I would cut out my own heart if I could mend Dorothy and give her the life that she deserves, the life Mother would have wanted for her. And if that means putting her under my own roof when I am inherited, then I will gladly do so! But why must that be her only option? Why can you not envision that some man of good esteem and quality could find her to be charming and intriguing?”

“Because I know how cruel people can be, that’s why,” Lord Forbes replied, though he was not angry. It was more like resigned sadness, a tone Dorothy could well remember hearing from him all these years.

“Do you honestly think men are not capable of being cruel to their

wives when they are beautiful? Or wealthy? Or of noble birth? Why, look at Aunt Miriam, her husband barely acknowledges her as his wife or the mother of his children. I've never heard the man say so much as a kind word to her, nor look upon her with even a hint of good regard. He speaks to his servants with more goodwill than he spares for her."

"Theirs is a... difficult... situation, Thomas," Lord Forbes began.

"So? In the past twenty years they cannot have settled into some relationship of mutual respect, if not mere friendship?" Thomas challenged.

"And that's what you would want for Dorothy?" his father retorted suddenly. Dorothy held her breath as concern for her future gripped at her insides.

"Of course not! I only mean that a woman who was as lovely as Aunt Miriam when she was younger still fell into the clutches of an indifferent, uncaring man. You seem to believe that any man who marries Dorothy would lock her in a tower and be rid of her. You can avoid such a terrible fate by choosing wisely instead of for wealth or position," Thomas explained.

Dorothy was determined to be away from there, to not hear another word as her own family plotted her fate without a thought for opinion. *This is what I get for listening at closed doors*, she thought miserably as she hurried to her room.

Want to know how the story ends?

Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

To Love the Scars of a Duchess

Thank you very much!

Also by Hazel Linwood

Thank you for reading ***A Spinster for the Unbending Duke!***

I hope you enjoyed it! If you did, may I ask you to **please write a review [HERE](#)**? It would mean the world to me. Your insightful comments and honest feedback help me get better!

Some other bestsellers of mine:

To Love the Scars of a Duchess

A Porcelain Viscountess

Just a Marriage of Convenience with the Duke

Lady of the Old Blood

Lady Physician

The Duke who Met His Match



Also, if you liked this book, you can check out my full **[Amazon Book Catalogue HERE](#)**.

I am grateful for having you by my side! You're a gem!

Hazel Linwood

Loved the Book?

If you loved this novel, click [here](#) to choose from a variety of books like this one by this author!



Just click on the image above! [↑](#)

If this wasn't your cup of tea, you can select another trope more to your liking [here](#)!

About the Author

Influenced by the extraordinary tales of Jane Austen and Maria Edgeworth, Hazel Linwood has always adored the fairy-tale like romances of the past. The youngest of four sisters, she has spent most of her youth lost in the classic historical romances of her favorite authors. Despite her parents' efforts to persuade her to pursue a career in medicine, she found her heart's true calling in English Literature.

After obtaining her degree, Hazel worked as an English teacher. That was until she met her husband and decided to indulge in her secret passion...writing! When she isn't writing, Hazel enjoys spending time with her family, travelling or roaming the Texan countryside.

Embark on this journey of desire, decorum and intense love of Regency England. Let Hazel transport you into an era of pure, sincere love and charming lords that will take your breath away!

Hazel is part of **Cobalt Fairy's** team of authors! Visit cobaltfairy.com for new, bargain and free deals for every dedicated bookworm there is out there!

